

**Reconstituting Selves in the Karachi Conflict  
Mohajir Women Survivors And Structural  
Violence**

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Working Paper Series # 94  
2004

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A publication of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI).

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# Reconstituting Selves In The Karachi Conflict Mohajir Women Survivors and Structural Violence

Lubna Nazir Chaudhry

## Abstract

*The paper focuses on the efforts of two Mohajir women survivors to reconstitute themselves in the wake of violence in Karachi, Pakistan. For women at the lowest rung of urban society the reconstruction of self has particular nuances in the face of structural violence. How do these women represent themselves as agents within the life-worlds they inhabit? How do post-colonial constructions of ethnicity, gender, and class play out in these representations? In highlighting how agency remains delimited by social positioning and circumstances, the paper argues for a complex understanding of women's agency and its implications in contexts of armed conflict.*

Keywords: Karachi, Mohajir, women, conflict, structural violence, agency

## Framing the Project

This paper focuses on *Mohajir* women's attempts to reconstitute<sup>1</sup> their selves as they rebuild their lives in the wake of conflict-generated violence that hit their homes during the 1990s in Karachi, Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Following Patai (1989: 150), the emphasis here is not on learning the facts of women's lives, but on comprehending "how a person verbally constructs an image of her life, how she creates a character for herself, how she becomes the protagonist of her own story." Using life-history interviews, I present and analyze two self-identified poor *Mohajir* women's self-representations post-conflict and post-trauma. These women in addition to other deprivations, each faced the death of a family member. In a vein similar to the "practice theory of self"<sup>3</sup> proffered by Skinner, Holland, and Pach III (1998:5), I see selves as sites of struggle, whereby these women survivors attempt to constitute themselves as agents, even as this agency remains constrained and circumscribed by their positioning in a society fraught with multiple forms of violence.<sup>4</sup>

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1 By 'reconstitute', I mean how women respond to circumstances and conflict in ways that change their self-understanding and relation to the world.

2 The mid-1990s was an intensely violent period in Karachi. Factions of militant groups ambushed each other and state security forces, while the state security forces clashed with alleged militants in so-called police encounters, arresting thousands of people in one day without a warrant, mostly from the poorer areas. In addition, there were bomb blasts that killed innocent bystanders. The official death count for only 1995 was around two thousand people. (Amnesty International 1996) See next section of this paper for the origin and history of the conflict.

3 According to Skinner, Holland, and Pach III (1998:6), the practice theory of selves views selves as "grounded in history, mediated by cultural discourses and practices, and yet makers of history, of culture, of selves." This approach embraces both social constructivism and the idea of human agency, seeing selves as being constituted through powerful discourses that are mediated, contested, and even co-produced by people as they create their selves. From such a perspective, self-making is a dynamic process, resulting in selves that shift across time and space. While the understanding of structures remains central to the understanding of how selves are constructed, it also becomes crucial to analyze people's activities and struggles.

4 See Chaudhry (1998) for further elaboration.

After the encounter with violence, pain and loss, survivors have to reconfigure their lives and selves in drastic ways.<sup>5</sup> Armed conflict causes the taken-for-granted everyday quality of the world to implode. When the world changes, the major players change, and the self also changes in relation to the world and others. The reconstruction of self is not linear and straightforward, and this process has particular nuances in settings characterized by resurfacing conflict and persistent structural violence, the everyday forms of violence that become normalized and naturalized.<sup>6</sup> Despite the relentlessly severe nature of circumstances, survivors display a remarkable creativity in carving out conditions under which they continue to survive and cope.<sup>7</sup> What kinds of selves are enacted in this bid for survival? What types of meaning-making processes underpin these enactments? Where are these meanings derived from? What possibilities of societal transformation, of movements towards peace, equity, and justice, emerge, if any at all, as we try to understand how survivors forge new selves and lives from within and against their violent worlds? In this essay I explore these and related questions focused on *Mohajir* women's experiences in the Karachi conflict.

My concern is especially with *Mohajir* women survivors at the lowest rung of urban society, those who, so to speak, inhabit the margins. The lives of poor *Mohajir* women survivors, as I will elaborate in the next section, are embedded in postcolonial<sup>8</sup> contexts of structural violence that are classed, gendered, and ethnicized. That is to say, if we understand structural violence to be systematic,<sup>9</sup> then the structural violence in the lives of these women is generated, experienced, and resisted within categories of class, gender, and ethnicity, in response to the shifting geopolitics of social stratification in a Third World urban center.<sup>10</sup> The intent, then, is to delineate how intersections of ethnicity, gender, and class play out in *Mohajir* women survivor's constructions and understandings of selves as they struggle on the fringes of Karachi.

Srinivasan (1990:307) posits the survivor of violence as a repository of invaluable knowledge, since the "*mechanisms of remembering and forgetting, describing and classifying, recounting and recreating,*

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5 See Das & Kleinman (2000) and Nordstrom (1997) for further elaboration of this point.

6 For Anglin (1998: 145) structural violence is "... normalized and accepted as part of the status quo," even as it "... is experienced as injustice and brutality at particular intersections of race, ethnicity, class, nationality, gender, and age." Structural violence is also referred to as everyday violence. See, for instance, Kleinman (2000) and Scheper-Hughes (1993). See Uvin (1998) for a detailed analysis of how and why structural violence led to physical violence in Rwanda. See also Galtung (1996) and Pilisuk & Tennant (1997) on the linkage between structural and direct violence

7 Nordstrom (1997: 15) cautions against subscribing to the thread in Western thought that prescribes violence as a necessary precondition for creativity. She writes, "To make violence the font of creativity essentializes and naturalizes violence. ... to survive, people are forced to create. ... but these are not the best conditions under which to be creative."

8 I am aware of the painful irony underwriting the use of the word "postcolonial". I use the term here not to signify an unequivocal state of decolonization, but merely to indicate a historical period that began when the colonizers left the sub-continent formally and physically after supposedly handing power over to the natives. While I agree with Shohat (1992) that the very idea of the end of colonialism is problematic in this neo-colonial era, I still find the term useful if we read/write postcoloniality as a condition which subsumes, continues, and extends the multi-dimensional violence of colonialism.

9 My understanding of structural violence is chiefly based on Anglin (1998); Farmer (1997); Galtung (1969, 1990, 1996); Kleinman (2000); (Pilisuk & Tennant, 1997); Scheper-Hughes (1992, 2002); and Uvin (1998). While these authors work from distinctively nuanced definitions of structural violence, they all utilize the concept to draw "... our attention to unequal life chances, usually caused by great inequality, injustice, discrimination, and exclusion and needlessly limiting people's physical, social, and psychological well-being" (Uvin, 1998: 105). They also agree that various forms of structural violence are "... products of social arrangements created by people in ways not easily noticed" (Pilisuk & Tennant, 1997).

10 While structural violence has come to be equated mostly with suffering resulting from poverty, feminist writing on the subject (e.g., Anglin, 1998); analyses of contexts in Africa (e.g., Uvin, 1998); and a strand in recent anthropological discussions (e.g., Scheper-Hughes, 2002) have broadened the scope of its usage to encompass a consideration of the unequal distribution of suffering and brutality due to additional measures of social stratification, such as ethnicity, religion, gender, and age.

*explaining and expressing, reflected in the survivor's testimony, all led back to the social fabric itself."* This "movement of history away from events to structures" in the Karachi context of conflict enables us to understand how the construction of marginalized selves is inextricably bound with the working of multi-layered power structures.<sup>11</sup> As Smith (1987) contends, individual cases are also points of entry into broader social and economic processes. My reading of interviews with two *Mohajir* women is meant to illustrate the manner in which the impact of global relations of domination, regional politics, repressive state apparatuses, multiple nationalisms, local hierarchies, and multi-leveled patriarchies, from the transnational to the familial, converge and intersect in the telling of a life story leading to the presentation of a self that can be contradictory and multi-faceted.<sup>12</sup> A focus on only two women survivors permits an in-depth look at the various manifestations of self and the systems of meaning underwriting these manifestations, even as it makes for a comparative base to demonstrate the heterogeneity of women's constructions, experiences, and realities in contexts of conflict, even when ethnicity, class, and geographical location are not disparate.

The approach<sup>13</sup> to selves and agency in this paper is perhaps best characterized by the conjoining of Third World poststructuralist feminist understandings of relational, hybridized, multiple selves<sup>14</sup> with materialist

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- 11 I find "structure" a useful construct, even as I recognize the ambiguity of "structure" as an overarching concept, which despite recent sophisticated attempts at reinvention, particularly by feminists, remains beset with problems of ahistoricity and intractability (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999). Social hierarchies do operate through structures and institutions, but societies change, structures and institutions are not completely deterministic, and individuals can intervene (see Connell, 1987, for an exhaustive discussion). What is key is that structures be regarded as dynamic and that an appraisal of structures should be accompanied by an understanding of historical and geographical underpinnings.
- 12 Grewal and Kaplan (1994: 17) stress the urgency to locate women's issues around the world in the "historicized particularity of their relationship" to "scattered hegemonies." While concurring with the imperative to situate women's concerns in the multi-layered power relations within which their lives are embedded, I believe the scattered hegemonies only *appear* to be scattered. They can be linked together in certain times and spaces through the effects they produce in people's lives and experiences.
- 13 I do not claim a "clean slate" approach to the interviews. While I am cognizant of the need to constantly interrogate theoretical frameworks in the light of empirical data, and not to use theory as a container into which the data must be poured (Lather, 1991), I read and write women's constructions of self in this paper through particular scholarly and experiential lenses, including the feminist lens which insists on the highlighting of women's constructions (for example, Lather, 1991; Phillips, 1990). I work from the assumption that grounded research requires a "reciprocal relationship between theory and data" (Lather, 1991:62), whereby priori theoretical frameworks are used in a dialectical manner, and theoretical frameworks are not rigid, but dynamic, subject to revision and modification. Also, I do not subscribe to the idea of theories as reified discourses, generated through processes of abstraction in purely academic pursuits, offering meta-narratives with ultimate explanatory power, but see them as "frames of intelligibility" through which the world is perceived and interpreted (Ebert, 1991: 122). These frames, according to this alternative viewpoint, can be formulated by anyone interested in making sense of specific aspects of reality, do not necessarily require an academic discourse for their articulation, and can draw upon sources not usually regarded as legitimate scholarship, such as narratives based on authors' personal experience. See Davies (1994) for details about the feminist engagement with the role and place of theory.
- 14 While poststructuralist feminism in general has utilized notions of multiple, discontinuous, and contradictory identities to decenter the humanist model of the unequivocally rational, autonomous, and unified (white) feminist subject, thereby creating spaces for hitherto unacknowledged different voices (e.g., Alcoff, 1988; de Lauretis, 1990), it is mostly feminists of color who have formulated a credible place for agency and resistance in a framework where the emphasis on fragmentation poses the danger of a nihilistic eschewing of political action. White feminist poststructuralists, such as Davies (1991) and Butler (1997), building on Foucauldian ideas about the unequal, heterogeneous effects of power relations as well as the viewpoint that power enables even as it constrains, do point to the possibility of resistance. For women of color writing on the subject, selves are sites of "struggle, effort, and tension" (Alarcon, 1990:365). Multiplicity, then, translates into hybridization rather than fragmentation, and affording the potential for reconfiguring racialized, classed, and gendered selves through knowledge of contexts, and their demands of identification and disidentification, paving the way for coalition-building across differences (Sandoval, 2000). Also, I undertake in Chaudhry (2004a) a critical scrutiny of my own self as a postcolonial feminist researcher "studying" women in conflict situations. As this self exists for the

feminism, the brand of anti-capitalist feminism that links class analysis to *all* aspects of women's lives and experiences.<sup>15</sup> The constitution of selves, from such a perspective, entails an ongoing negotiation (Alarcon, 1990). Agency can be achieved through relationality (Joseph, 1999), and the capacity to dexterously utilize multiple identities through a consciousness of the differential impact of power relations in different contexts (Sandoval, 1991; 2000). Consciousness of multiple selves, however, many times a consequence of ruptures caused by forces of domination, might not always entail agency or resistance, as the workings of power relations in certain contexts might foreclose the array of options available for the constitution of selves. I, therefore, locate enactments of selves in the linkages between history, and, at times intersecting and contradictory, yet discrete, axes of domination/resistance, such as class, gender, and ethnicity (Frankenberg and Mani, 1993; Mohanty, 1987). This study of how economics and multi-level patriarchies define selves and agency, thus, taking into account historical and contemporary global relations of power, the colonial and neo-colonial politics of lasting inequalities within and between nation-states.

This piece of writing continues the work undertaken by Khattak (2002), Saigol (2002), and de Mel (2003) by utilizing feminist lenses to examine selected themes emerging from interviews collected for the *Archive on Women, Conflict, and Security* (SDPI, 2001).<sup>16</sup> The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) study, which included data collection in Karachi,<sup>17</sup> was designed to privilege women's standpoints about conflict situations.<sup>18</sup> What distinguishes the SDPI initiative from the few other efforts<sup>19</sup> to write about *Mohajir*

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most part in relation to my research participants, issues with respect to their voice and agency also come up in the course of discussion. Chaudhry (1998), Chaudhry (1999), and Chaudhry (2004b) also address the issue of agency.

- 15 Materialist feminism distinguishes itself from earlier Marxist feminisms by emphasizing the intersection of class with other vectors of differentiation among women, imploding monolithic conceptions of patriarchy, and exposing the linkages between the unequal distribution of resources, the making of meanings, and subjectivity (Belsey, 2000; Hennessey and Ingraham, 1997).
- 16 The project, funded by the Ford Foundation, was developed as a contribution to feminist and alternative security scholarship about South Asia by South Asian scholars. It entailed the creation of an archive of interviews with women in conflict situations as well as the publication of articles based on those interviews. I was one of six researchers who participated in the project. Although the structure of the project remained hierarchical – two of the researchers served as coordinators, and most of the interviews were conducted by research assistants “trained” for the purpose – the entire process did reflect a remarkable spirit of collaboration among the six researchers. Besides writing our individual papers, we facilitated the workshop for the research assistants, co-developed the interview protocols, and gave our input at different stages in the project. Three of us also participated in the fieldwork. I conducted interviews with 7 women survivors. The project's culmination was marked by a two-day workshop in August 2001 where the researchers in the project joined other activists and scholars in an intensive discussion around the study's findings and their relevance to feminist movements for peace.
- 17 58 women were interviewed within the Karachi context of violence. The interviews were tape-recorded. In addition, the interviewers took extensive notes about the settings and interactions during the interviews. The research focused primarily on women impacted by the ethnic violence that was generated after April 1985 and has persisted in various forms to this date, but also encompasses the later sectarian killings that were an offshoot of the ethnic violence.
- 18 Smith (1987) and Collins (1986) provided useful starting points for the conceptualization of the research design.
- 19 As Saigol (2002) notes, the gender dimension and questions related to women's roles in the conflict remain missing from most accounts of the Karachi violence. Verkaaik (2004)'s ethnographic study of the MQM in Hyderabad does incorporate a gendered analysis in its scrutiny of the masculinist underpinnings of MQM members' identities. Women, however, are absent from the narrative, and the author pleads inaccessibility to female spaces as the reason. Of the four available analyses of women in the Karachi context of violence, Shah (1998) is the only study that claims to be research-based. Shah's collection of testimonies, which includes the voices of *Mohajir* women, yields themes that are similar to the SDPI study when it comes to the impact of violence on women, but its analytical scope does not allow for an understanding of women's constructions of their life-worlds and their place in it. Farrukh (1994), Haroon (2001), and Mumtaz (1996) write about the place and roles of women in the MQM movement. All three articles provide useful activist-oriented reports, and Haroon's story of a peace-building initiative by the Pakistani Women's Action Forum (WAF) in

women's experiences in the Karachi armed violence is the attempt to achieve an understanding of the genesis, proliferation, and impact of violence through the elicitation of life-histories from women survivors. By the incorporation of an approach that encouraged self-reflection,<sup>20</sup> the emphasis was shifted from a mere recounting of the effects of violence to an analysis of experiences, allowing for connections across spatial and temporal contexts.

The articles based on the SDPI data set, including the present paper, though, can, at the most, claim to *highlight* and *foreground* the research participants' perspectives. In the ultimate analysis, the privileged voice in each of the papers is that of the researcher-writer. The survivor women's words, educed through interviews undertaken in hierarchical contexts,<sup>21</sup> were subjected to an analytical scrutiny, and interviews were selected, themes and theoretical frameworks were developed, and language choices were made, in order to put forth insights motivated by the writer's agenda.<sup>22</sup>

This paper is divided into four sections. The next section provides the historical, geographic, and economic contours of the politics underlying Karachi's conflict, and its impact on *Mohajir* women. This leads into a discussion of the selves and agency of Mehr-un-Nisa and Ayesha Begum, the two *Mohajir* women survivors, I am choosing to write about. The final section sums up issues raised in this paper, posing questions for feminist theorizing and praxis.<sup>23</sup>

## On the Karachi Conflict

Karachi, despite the recurrent violence, with an average of 630 violent deaths (95 per cent male) per year from 1990-2000,<sup>24</sup> remains the financial capital of Pakistan, holding 50% of the bank assets in the country (Gayer, 2003). Karachi, presently the seat of Sind's provincial government, is Pakistan's largest city, with a population of around 10 million, according to the 1998 census.<sup>25</sup> In Karachi, 50% of the population live in *bastis* (squatter settlements) on the outskirts of the city, where amenities such as electricity and clean water are not a given.<sup>26</sup> Whereas postcolonial Karachi does not retain the "black" and "white" divisions of the British era, the contrast

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Karachi is especially instructive. Nevertheless, *Mohajir* women's perspectives are not the key focus of these papers, and even *Mohajir* women's experiences beyond the movement or conflict are not a concern.

20 Phillips (1990: 99-100) posits self-reflexive life stories, "gathered in a self-critical way", as a key vehicle in the understanding of women's constructions of their selves, lives, and experiences.

21 I am thankful to Oakley (1981), one of the earlier feminist critiques of the interview process, for helping me articulate the discomfort I felt with the research situation.

22 In the spirit of feminist writing (for example, Chaudhry, 1999; Lather, 1991; Minh-ha, 1989; Visweswaran, 1994), at certain junctures in this article I make myself exist as a social subject who shapes the process of inquiry and is in turn shaped by what transpires. Space restrictions do limit my exercise of self-reflexivity, since the focus here, I have decided, should be primarily on the analysis of women's realities. See also Chaudhry (2004a) for further grappling on the issue of conducting research with women in conflict situations.

23 I agree with Sangari & Vaid (1989: 3) that we need to "discard the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations."

24 Khattak (2002).

25 These official figures (Government of Pakistan, 1998) have been contested from various quarters. Some sources list Karachi's population as over 12 million (Hasan, 1999). The census data remains imprecise because of a significant population of undocumented, so-called illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and other countries of origin. Also, there are no exact figures available for "legal" Afghan refugees.

26 The squatter communities, the *bastis*, are built on illegally occupied land along the city's drainage channels, railway lines and inside river-beds. Most of the houses in the *bastis* are made of a mixture of baked and unbaked bricks, or with bricks (baked and otherwise) and metal sheets. (Gayer, 2003; Hasan, 1999; SDPI, 2001).

between the elite parts of town, and these *bastis* is striking (Gayer, 2003). The middle and lower-middle class localities lie between these two extremes, in the geographical sense as well as level of material comfort.

Before the British occupied Karachi in 1839, it was just a small fishermen's village, but it was already an important point in a sea-route linking China and parts of India to Africa and Europe. (Lari and Lari, 1996) The British developed Karachi's port, and exploited its strategic location in the World Wars<sup>27</sup> to their advantage. (Gayer, 2003) Just before partition, Karachi had 450,000 inhabitants, of which 61.2% claimed Sindhi as their mother tongue and 6.3% spoke Urdu-Hindu (Hasan, 1999). Also, 51% of the population was Hindu, and 42% was Muslim (Hasan, 1999). Hasan (1999: 24) writes:

*“By 1951, all this had changed and Karachi's population had increased to 1.137 million, because of the influx of 600,000 refugees from India. In 1951, the Sindhi speaking population was 8.6 per cent, the Urdu speaking population was 50 per cent, the Muslim population was 96 per cent, and the Hindu population was 2 per cent.”*

Karachi was declared the newly formed nation's capital in 1948, partially because the other strong contender for the position, Lahore, like the rest of Punjab, was still reeling from the impact of the Partition violence (Tan and Kudaisya, 2000). This involved taking Karachi out of Sind, and turning it into a centrally-administered area. (Tan and Kudaisya, 2000). Sind received no compensation, and lost control of their most thriving area. The fact of the geographically reconfigured province coupled with the radically shifting demographics, whereby Sindhis became a minority in what had been the urban center of their province, set the stage for the conflict between Sindhis and non-Sindhis, including the group who were later to call themselves, *Mohajirs*, the Urdu speaking Muslim immigrants from India (Jalal, 1990). The Sindhis, mostly rural, came to resent the largely urban Urdu-speaking population, while the immigrants set themselves up as the civilized, enlightened urbanites against the feudalistic, backward Sindhis (Verkaaik, 2004).

Post-partition, Karachi also became Pakistan's industrial center, and initially its workforce was mostly drawn from the working class Urdu speaking Muslim immigrants from India. Karachi's demographics continued to shift in the 1950s and 1960s, and the city became increasingly multi-ethnic. While Balochi workers were already present in the city at Partition, Pathans from the North West Frontier Province also migrated to Karachi in the 1950s and 1960s, and so did the Punjabis in the 1960s. The Pathans were mostly involved in construction, and were awarded the transport business in Karachi as part of state patronage during Ayub Khan's regime (1958-1969).<sup>28</sup> The 1998 census shows the following population breakdown in terms of mother tongue: Urdu, 48.52%; Punjabi, 13.94%; Pushto, 11.42%; Sindhi, 7.22%; Balochi, 4.34%; Seraiki, 2.11%; and others, which include speakers of Bengali, Gujarati, and Brahui, are 12.4%. (Government of Pakistan, 1998) The different working class groups were settled along ethnic lines in the *bastis* on the periphery of Karachi from Partition onwards (Gayer, 2003).

According to Wright (1991), 1947-1951, represents the era of the dominance of Urdu speaking immigrants in Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> A segment of this population, the Muslim elite that had received the benefits of a colonial education, comprised 55.6% of the Civil Service of Pakistan (Shaikh, 1997). This Muslim elite had also been the most fervent supporter of the Pakistan movement, and, therefore, could lay claim to a high degree of political involvement with the new state. (Tambiah, 1996) The claim of ownership translated into Urdu being the national language of the country. (Rahman, 1996) By the early fifties, however, the *Mohajirs* had to share

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27 Food and equipment to British and allied troops went through Karachi. Karachi also served as a ship repairation port from 1942-45 (Gayer, 2003).

28 Here I draw from the history of Karachi's conflict synthesized in Khattak (2002).

29 See Ahmar (1996), Shaikh (1997), and Verkaaik (2004) for details.

their hegemony with the Punjabis, the largest group in Pakistan, who had already constituted 85% of the Pakistani army at Partition,<sup>30</sup> and now made up the difference in the Civil Service by virtue of their sheer numbers (Tambiah, 1996). When the capital of Pakistan shifted from Karachi to the new city of Islamabad, the balance started to shift towards the Punjabis. (Tan and Kudaisya, 2000) The Mohajir's position declined under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977), a Sindhi, who decentralized the power of the bureaucracy, and uplifted the Sindhis, by creating rural quotas in jobs and education (Wright, 1991). Also, by this time, the state after successive military-led governments had become very militarized, and Punjabi hegemony had become entrenched (Rizvi, 2000). This decline continued, when another military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, came to power in 1977 (Tambiah, 1996). Zia-ul-Haq in his eleven years of rule further consolidated the power of Punjabis (Jalal, 1993). The tentative attempts to regain power through a coalition with Benazir Bhutto in 1988-1990 did not prove to be very fruitful. (Tambiah, 1996). Also with the rise of the *Mohajir Qaumi Mahaaz* (MQM, Mohajir nationality Front/Movement), the leadership for the Urdu-speaking immigrant community originating from India now began to be drawn from the middle classes rather than the elite (Verkaaik, 2004). The manner in which the Urdu-speaking elite got increasingly sidelined in the Pakistani political and bureaucratic scene was, nevertheless, utilized by the middle class and lower middle class *Mohajirs* as a symbol of the decline of the entire population of those whose families had originated in northern, central, and Western India.

It is customary to frame the contemporary phrase<sup>31</sup> of the armed violence in Karachi, beginning in 1985, in the reign of military dictator Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), and, extending into the present as an ethnic conflict, which, then, produced a sectarian, religion-based, off-shoot, culminating in the post-September 11 hotbed of terrorism.<sup>32</sup> It is also customary to frame this violence, in its various permutations, as oppositional to the project of modernity represented by processes of industrialization, urbanization, and the formation of a democratic nation-state. However, as Bowen (2002:336) reminds us, "*ethnic thinking in political is a product of modern conflicts over power and resources, and not an ancient impediment to political modernity.*"

Alavi (1989:246) in his analysis of the 1985 and 1986 riots sees the "ethnic conflict explanation" as insufficient. Ethnic solidarities, he writes, "were ... exploited," but the "powerful organized interests that were at work" need to be taken account. I would add, that the urban struggles in which the politics of ethnicity were deployed by powerful organized groups have to be contextualized in the specific set of historical and political conditions characterizing the post-independent Pakistan.

The riots of 1985 that marked the onset of Karachi's contemporary conflict, started in Orangi, the largest *basti* (squatter settlement). These riots initially occurred between transport-users, *Mohajirs* and Punjabis, and transporters, often Pathans, and escalated into protracted armed violence between *Mohajirs* and Pathans.<sup>33</sup> Shaikh (1997) cites the strain placed on Karachi's population as a result of the congestion and inadequate public transportation system as a major cause of this violence. Although Karachi had witnessed anti-Ahmedi riots in the 1950s and 1969-70, anti-Pathan riots in 1965, and Sindhi-*Mohajir* riots in 1972-73, the 1985 riots, and the subsequent 1986 riots between Pathans and *Mohajirs* were unprecedented in the level of cruelty exhibited as well as the extent of the death and destruction. The influx of weapons into Karachi as they made their way north to support the US-backed, and Pakistan-assisted, *Mujahideen* (braves) in Afghanistan was responsible for the scale of brutality (Gayer, 2003; Jalal; 1994; Khattak; 2002; Shaikh, 1997). The intervention

30 The British recruited Punjabis heavily into the Indian army, because they were considered as a martial race (Ali, 1984).

31 See Gayer (2003), Khattak (2002), Shaikh (1997), Tambiah, (1996) Verkaaik (2004) for exhaustive and critical analyses of Karachi's conflict.

32 See, for instance, John (2003). This is also very typical of the Western media's representation of Karachi's violence in general. See also Gayer (2003) for a brief on how Karachi's violence is generally viewed.

33 The riots in 1985 were triggered when a road accident involving a Pathan driver killed a young Mohajir woman. See Shaheed (1990) and Gayer (2003) for a full account.

by the state security forces in 1985, with the deployment of the army against the so-called rioters, also set the tone of subsequent crackdowns by the repressive state apparatuses, which in the mid-1990s, during Nawaz Sharif's and Benazir Bhutto's tenures,<sup>34</sup> were at their most brutal, earning Pakistan the charge of severe human rights violations (Amnesty International, 1996; Gayer, 2003; Shaikh, 1997). For Hussain (1990) the rioting and the state brutality represented the failure of the state to provide the political mechanism for its citizens to express and redress their grievances. For others this was yet another reincarnation of the militarized, coercive state that had so ruthlessly sought to put down the perceived insurgency in 1971 in what was then East Pakistan (Askari, 2000; Shaikh, 1997).

The group in Karachi that has been continuously exposed to the changing configurations of the violence in their city began to call itself *Mohajir* around the time of this explosion in violence. (Khattak, 2002; Saigol, 2002) Literally meaning "one who has migrated,"<sup>35</sup> *Mohajir*, in the context of the politics of identity in Pakistan, has come to designate a collectivity primarily comprising of lower-middle class and working class Muslim immigrant families from India (the elite Muslim immigrants from India have not identified with this label), who after the 1947 Partition of the sub-continent were settled mostly in Hyderabad and Karachi<sup>36</sup> in a bid to create electoral constituencies for certain members of the Muslim League, including Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. This settlement of Urdu-speaking immigrants in Sindh was also part of a Punjabi move to preserve the homogeneity of the Punjab province, which had accommodated the immigrants moving from Eastern Punjab (Alavi, 1989). The term *Mohajir* also encompasses Muslim immigrants who came to Karachi from India after 1947, as well as the Biharis who migrated to Pakistan during or after the 1971 struggle for independence in the former East Pakistan. *Mohajirs* are primarily Urdu speaking, although its members originated from diverse places in what is now the nation-state of India.<sup>37</sup> Before the ascendancy of the MQM, in the 1980s, the middle and lower class Urdu-speaking population in Karachi had preferred the identity label Hindustani (Shaikh, 2003).

Altaf Hussain, a *Mohajir* student at the Karachi University, conceived the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO) in 1979.<sup>38</sup> Central to the political ethos propagated by Altaf Hussain was the idea that the Mohajirs be accorded the status of the "fifth nationality" at par with the four "national" groups, the ethnic entities, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchis, and Pathans, that had laid claim to the four provinces of Pakistan, Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, and the North Western Frontier Province. When Zia-ul-Haq banned all student organizations in 1984, the MQM was born. According to various reports, MQM was a recipient of state patronage in its initial years, since the Zia regime wanted to counter the power of the Sindhis, the ethnic group

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34 The "Operation Clean-Up" meant to eradicate the militant groups who were now labeled as "terrorists" was launched by Nawaz Sharif's government, which took power in 1990 from Benazir Bhutto, and was ousted in 1993, when Benazir Bhutto took power again after a brief period in which there was an interim, caretaking government. The game of musical chair continued with Nawaz Sharif becoming Prime Minister again in 1997, after Benazir Bhutto's assembly was dissolved yet again. However, despite their differences, Benazir Bhutto persisted with "Operation Clean-Up" in Sindh.

35 I borrow this translation from Shaikh (1997:3). The use of the identity label *Mohajir* is meant to evoke the first migration of significance in Islamic history, that of the Prophet Mohammed and his follower's migration from Makkah to Madina in the wake of persecution by non-believers.

36 See Saigol (2002) for insights into the deployment of the term *Mohajir* as an ethnic and political label; Gayer (2003) and Shaikh (1997) for analytical histories of the evolution of the *Mohajir* identity; and Alavi (1989) for a discussion of ethnic formations in Pakistan. All these writings highlight the constructed nature of the *Mohajir* identity.

37 Gujarati and Madrasi are examples of other languages spoken by some *Mohajirs* (SDPI, 2001; Shaikh, 1997). Punjabi-speaking populations crossing the border into Pakistan from the Indian side of the Punjab are not included in this usage of *Mohajir* as a proper noun, although in certain parts of Punjab these populations are still referred to as *mohajir* to distinguish them from people inhabiting those areas before Partition (WB, 2002).

38 My account of the genesis and rise of the MQM is based on Gayer (2003), Shaikh (1997), Tambiah (1996), Tan and Kudaisya (2000), and Verkaaik (2004).

of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the ruler Zia-ul-Haq had ousted (Khattak, 2002). The MQM's attempt to construct a political identity through a collective sense of disenfranchisement and alienation among a heterogeneous group of religious sects and classes did enlist a great degree of support. The MQM was especially attractive to the large body of lower middle and working class young men<sup>39</sup> disillusioned by the unequal life chances available to them in the urban metropolis (Hasan, 1987). The MQM established itself politically in the 1988 and 1990 elections, and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party had to form a coalition with them in order to take on the reins of control. The coalition ended with violence between Sindhis and *Mohajirs* (Tambiah, 1996).

The devastation in Karachi in the mid-1990s with around 2000 people killed in 1995 (Amnesty International, 1996), and approximately the same number of deaths in 1996, as well as the mass arrests and persecution of alleged MQM activists, their families, and even their entire localities by the state security forces (Shaikh, 1997, Tan and Kudaisya, 2000, Verkaaik, 2001), was the continuation of the earlier culture of violence that had set in the 1980s, but there were also new developments. For one, in 1991, the MQM split into two factions, with MQM Haq Parast (literally the lovers of truth) still under the leadership of Altaf Hussain, and the splinter group calling itself MQM-Haqiqi group. Verkaaik (2004) traces a rise in the militancy of the MQM in this division. The militancy also took the form of brutal killings of members of the rival faction, through shoot-outs, ambushes, and bombs. Second, in 1992, the Pakistani Intelligence declared MQM as a terrorist group, emulating other contexts of state-sanctioned violence where such a charge was used to justify excessive force against citizens (Zulaika and Douglas, 1996). Third, there were reports of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), that the Indian Intelligence Agency, was funding MQM's organized violence in retribution for Pakistan's contribution to the conflict in Kashmir.<sup>40</sup>

While Altaf Hussain and other high-ranking leaders left Pakistan to avoid state persecution, the elite moved their businesses and themselves to other parts of Pakistan or abroad (Verkaaik, 2004), the brunt of the violence from various sources was faced by the communities, mostly *Mohajir*, living in the *bastis* (Khattak, 2002; Shaikh, 1997). Innumerable families were rendered destitute when they lost homes, breadwinners, and livelihoods in a city torn apart by armed conflict (SDPI, 2001; Shah, 1998). The lack of adequate medical services and disaster-mitigating programs coupled with unchecked persecution by the state security agencies deepened the experience of chaos and vulnerability (SDPI, 2001; Shah, 1998). The conflict-generated violence thus intensified the structural violence that had circumscribed the lives of the women and families in the *bastis*. Even during the relative lull in the violence after the 1999 coup in Pakistan, whereby the current President of Pakistan, General Musharraf seized power from Nawaz Sharif, the so-called reconstruction of the urban metropolis has mostly involved the re-adornment of elite spaces, for instance, through the building of Western style malls. The women who are at the center of discussion in this paper continued with the tasks of grieving and surviving with little or no change in the material fabric of their lives or the conditions of their surroundings.

## The Reconstitution of Selves in the Urban Margins

Here I write about/from my interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 2000 with Ayesha Begum and Mehr-un-Nisa, both of them residents of Orangi, Karachi's largest *basti* with an estimated population of about

39 The MQM also have a Women's Wing, although the women members of the party do not enjoy the same status as men. Also the female membership of MQM has never equaled the male membership numerically. Still as Haroon (2001: 183) notes, "Since 1947, there has not been such mobilization of women." See also Farrukh (1994) and Mumtaz (1996) for earlier accounts of women in the MQM.

40 This was brought to my attention by journalist colleagues in India during a discussion at a three-day seminar entitled "Reflections on Violence" organized by the Seminar Foundation, Neemrana, India, December 1-3, 2001. See, also Ahmar (1996) for this theory.

one million, which provided a significant percentage of the blue-collar workforce as well as employees for the informal sector, especially during the heyday of Karachi's economy before the current violence (Gayer, 2003). The majority of Orangi residents are *Mohajir*, and the contemporary Karachi conflict started here in 1985. At the time of the interview, Ayesha Begum, whose teenaged son was reportedly shot by the police for keeping company with terrorists, was in her early sixties, while Mehr-un-Nisa, whose nineteen year old brother was apparently caught in the crossfire between rival MQM factions, was somewhere in her late teens to early twenties. The difference in age between the two women, although significant, cannot be conclusively linked to all the differences evidenced in these women's presentation of selves during the interviews. However, the fact that Ayesha Begum migrated to Karachi in 1948 as part of the earlier influx of post-partition immigrants from India, and Mehr-un-Nisa was born in Karachi a few years after her family moved here in 1970 from what was then East Pakistan, does make for quite different relationships to the term *Mohajir*. The two women also differed with respect to their caste identities and their family's points of origin in India.

The interviews took place in the research participants' homes. Given the nature of the insecurity in Orangi, even in that time of relative peace in 2000, interviews were conducted in only one sitting of two to three hours, since follow-up visits were considered risky for the research participants as well as the research team. Interviews were tape-recorded. I also took copious notes during the interactions, jotting down my reflections about the people and the setting. The interviews were conducted in Urdu, the home language of the research participants, and Pakistan's national language. My notes were in a mixture of Urdu and English. The recorded material was first transcribed in Urdu, and then translated into English.

The interviews were semi-structured, and, therefore, relatively open-ended. We generated a list of broad topics around which questions would be asked, but there was neither a prescribed order nor a compulsion to adhere to any rigid wording of questions. Our goal was to listen to the life stories of research participants as those experiencing, and living, violence, but also as those who had lives beyond that experience of violence. Also, we wanted to facilitate a listening space where research participants were encouraged to share with us their meaning-making processes, their analysis of their lives and experiences in contexts of violence as well as through connections they made between different aspects of their lives before and after the violence affected their families and communities. I was keen to understand the kinds of selves participants constructed during the course of the interview. In other words, when the research participant said, "I", what subject position was she speaking from, what story was being told and what spaces of agency could be located in these constructions and stories. Although we did not get narratives of self in the strictest sense, we did get representations<sup>41</sup> and constructions from research participants. The interaction style was contingent on the particular research participant and the circumstances under which interviews were conducted. The research design was not participatory in nature.<sup>42</sup>

In my writing about the interviews I have tried to attain the complexity that the interviews had conveyed: women's constructions of themselves in different times and spaces were not linear or unitary. I am also looking at the interviews as a Third World feminist committed to understanding the scope of women's agency and using that understanding as a point of departure to locate possibilities of equitable and peaceful social change.

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41 Here I echo DuPlessis (1990) who suggests that representation itself becomes a site of struggle in the works of twentieth century Western women modernists. These women are faced with the challenge of expressing themselves in an aesthetic tradition that has colonized female figures. DuPlessis compellingly details the ambiguous power of these women writers as they attempted to rupture and disturb the very systems of meaning from which they were drawing.

42 See Lather (1991) for a perspective on participatory research whereby the research participants co-construct the parameters defining a project and are involved in the entire project from the conceptualization stage to the writing up of the analysis and application as well as dissemination of findings.

The following discussion about Ayesha Begum and Mehr-un-Nisa by no means claims to be an exhaustive account or analysis of their lives and experiences. I analyze the manner in which both women represented themselves during the course of the interview. Encapsulated within the interviews were women's representations of selves spanning the past, the continuous present, and even the perceived or desirous future, but these representations were constructed from the vantage point of the "now". Although I was welcomed graciously, even warmly, in most homes I visited, and the trusting attitude of the survivors I interviewed never failed to amaze me, I still wondered what was said or not said, because I was a Punjabi, maybe not "like the ones who lived in Karachi" as one research participant put it, but, nevertheless, a member of the most powerful ethnic group in Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

### **Ayesha Begum**

The interview with Ayesha Begum took place in the small room she shared with her three unmarried children in the two-room house built of unbaked bricks and metal sheets. Ayesha sat on the bed against the wall, upright, without leaning against the pillow her son placed behind her back. I sat on a chair next to the bed, with my recording equipment rather precariously balanced on my lap. As the interview unfolded, Ayesha's children and her neighbors drifted in and out of the room we sat in, sometimes at the pretext of bringing us tea, and sometimes without giving any reason at all. We drank a lot of very strong tea, and for the most part, it was Ayesha who talked. Her initial reserve lasted only two questions into the session, and very soon it became difficult to even utter questions. Ayesha alternated between animated story telling and passionate lecture modes, although she would politely, even if very briefly, provide a response to my specific queries. Overall, I was left with a lasting impression of a vibrant woman with a keen intellect, who tempered her anger and bitterness with humor and practicality.

What emerged from the interview was a strong sense of Ayesha Begum, the mother, and Ayesha Begum, the citizen-subject, struggling to meet her obligations and responsibilities towards her children, severely disappointed with the treatment meted out to her by structures that were supposed to support and protect her, but still not disillusioned enough to give up entirely on the promise of deliverance that these structures held for her children and herself. Ayesha, the mother, and Ayesha, the citizen-subject were, at times, distinct from each other, but mostly they worked together, voicing Ayesha's paradoxical anticipation of safety and trauma from the patriarchal family and the masculinist nation-state. While sometimes acutely aware of the impossibility of her desires for security and stability – she was, after all, poor, a woman, and the member of a group targeted by repressive state apparatuses, her incessant critique of the larger socio-historical processes in which her circumstances were situated, pointed to her faith in the possibility of change rather than the immutability of structures. Motherhood, a site of continual strife and painful loss, and citizenship, a state of unmet expectations and seething rage, nevertheless, provided anchorage in a chaotic world typified by recurring violence and ongoing displacement.

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43 Although Musharraf, the Army General, who seized power through a coup in 1999, is a *Mohajir* in that his Urdu-speaking family immigrated from the Indian side of the border to Pakistan, Punjabis still constitute a heavy majority of the army and bureaucracy. According to Tambiah (1996), Punjabi hegemony started to take shape in the 1950s, for the Pakistan movement was spearheaded mostly by North Indian Urdu-speaking Muslims. He writes, "Punjabi dominance in contemporary Pakistan's politics is one of the factors in the discontent of certain provinces and lies behind the stress on the need for provincial autonomy and for keeping the federal government in check. Punjabi dominance is the inevitable backdrop to any study of Pakistan's ethnic conflicts." The predominance of Punjabis in the Pakistani military, however, was a post-independence continuation of a colonial practice. In the context of the Karachi violence, being a Punjabi also meant sharing the ethnicity of the police contingent reputed to be the experts in torture. During the nineties the Punjab Police was sent out to Karachi on several occasions to help curb the violence. The "Rangers," a national paramilitary force, also deployed during armed violence in Karachi was heavily Punjabi.

Ayesha Begum told me that she was taking medicine for high blood pressure as well as tranquilizers to help her sleep. The transportation situation in Karachi made it difficult to go to the hospital from where she got her medicine, and the medicine was also expensive, so she had learned to spread out the doses to last a long time. Thoughts of her children, the dead and the alive, raised her blood pressure and kept her awake. Since her husband had passed away a few years ago, she was the only one responsible for keeping the household together. Her older sons had only part-time employment in a nearby factory; her youngest son was too afraid to go outside after his brother died; her youngest daughter, having giving up her dream to get a science degree, after her high school was teaching in a private school for very little money; the three married daughters were not happy at all; and she had to somehow arrange matches for the unmarried children.

Ayesha Begum cast herself as a mother from a particular class background. “*How very hard is it for the poor to bring up their children!*” She exclaimed at more than one juncture in the interview. Yet, Ayesha Begum’s positioning of herself as a mother who was poor was not merely an expression of abject helplessness. The mother who mourned the unlawful killing of her son, and lamented the lack of opportunities for her other children, was also a mother who voiced a trenchant protest against the system that had abused her, and others occupying the margins, rendering them powerless:

*Every new government needs votes to get elected. We make queues all day long and cast votes. If we do something for them, what do they do for us? They kill our children. The police enter the houses by force and harass people. The police demand money in return for freeing our children. But how can we poor manage it? They pick the locks and break the doors. Where do we get the money to fix them? Do we vote to get maltreatment from the elected government? They should take care of people rather than harming them. ...*

Even when narrating the event of her son’s death, intense grief was juxtaposed with forceful indignation against the denial of rights to her son and herself as citizen-subjects:

*If my son had done anything wrong at all, he should have been put behind bars. If he was sentenced, there would have been hope for his release after the punishment was over. ... If the killers had ever come to me, I would have requested them to probe into the matter first. Only a mother can understand the grief and pain of losing a child, only the one who gives birth and brings up a child with so much care and difficulty can understand ... The question is, why did they lift my son? If any wrongdoers accompanied him, they should have made inquiries. Suppose a child does something wrong to anybody, the parents first ask him about it; and if the child is at fault, only then they scold him. What a blind reign this is. They kill without inquiry or investigation.*

The pain of the bereaved mother and the outrage against the violation of citizens’ rights was a cry for due process, and desirable state apparatuses that would offer justice and nurturance rather than violence and inhumanity. Ayesha Begum refused the interpellation of herself as the mother of a “terrorist”, reverting the charge of lawlessness on to those who would brand her son. Thus, her challenge to the perpetrators of the crime against her son, the cogs in the bureaucratic wheel intent on getting rid of supposed threats to the peace and security of the state, was couched in terms of a reminder of the humanity they shared with her rather than any declaration of retaliatory desire.

*... my family did not inform me about it ... If I were aware of it I would have gone to the police station and asked what would happen to them if they killed their own son! Don't they feel sorry by doing so with the children of others?*

Ayesha Begum's powerful articulation against structural violence derived from her identification with her social space, even as it gendered the citizen-subject as a mother and a widow. Since the populations in the *bastis* on the outskirts of post-Partition Karachi were initially settled along ethnic lines, and the segregation intensified as other groups came into the city, the 'we' used by Ayesha Begum was classed as well as ethnicized:

*We vote for them with the hope that someone of our locality might get elected as the councilor and we would go to him to get our problems redressed. But no one from our locality gets elected, no one from whom we can request something. We are totally helpless. These days it is the rule of the police, and they inflict cruelties. ... How can the poor have any peace? The poor are born just to die. Now, where can the widows go? ... the police harass the widows more. They enter the houses without permission and upset everything, lift the children and demand money. They threaten us if we don't pay them. We did not vote for this. There is neither electricity nor water in our area. Whom do we approach for this?*

In speaking of her ethnicity, however, Ayesha Begum used the relatively apolitical identity label "Hindustani" which was employed to designate Urdu-speaking immigrants from Northern India before the ascendancy of MQM and the term *Mohajir*. Despite Ayesha Begum's elision of her identity as *Mohajir*, Ayesha Begum's construction of herself as a citizen-subject of Pakistan was predicated heavily on a narrative of arrival that underscored her Muslim identity, and the hardships faced during the migration, resonating with what is put forth as the quintessential *Mohajir* experience by the MQM (Shaikh, 1997). However, Ayesha's incorporation of classed and gendered dimensions, as well as an attention to the power dynamics that infused the settlement process, did fissure the myth of the educated *Mohajir*, who claimed that sacrifices earned them their due in the Muslim country, till their position was usurped by other less deserving ethnicities:

*... Many Muslims also accompanied us to this land. ... We stayed there at the border for about fifteen to twenty days. Then the government sent tickets with the order stating how many refugees would go to Karachi, Sindh, or other places. We were sent to Shikarpur. My father had no income then. First he left India, then Shikarpur, and went to Karachi. I was not married at that time. Beyond Jail Road, ... we put up our tents. ... We stayed there like that for a year and then proper plots were allotted to us where we made our huts and also my husband (made his hut) ... I was fourteen or fifteen and got married ... my father-in-law had a desire to marry his son early so that children would be born and the race would increase ... I studied up to fourth and fifth class in addition to Holy Quran. I had to shoulder household responsibilities as a child. ...*

Ayesha's description of her family's multiple displacements in the early years in Pakistan is mirrored in her account of fleeing her home and finding refuge in various rented homes in different parts of Karachi to avoid police persecution during Benazir Bhutto's second tenure (1993-1996) as Prime Minister. This was the time period when Ayesha's son was killed, and her other sons were repeatedly harassed, because

of their dead brother's supposed connections with the MQM.<sup>44</sup> At one point, the police, under trumped-up charges, took all of her four remaining sons into custody. Ayesha arranged the release of her sons by paying off the police through borrowed funds, but the police incursions into their home continued, so leaving home was the only recourse. Ayesha drew a parallel between the violence that led to her migration into Karachi, and the brutality that triggered the more recent internal migration, "*Such cruelty and lawlessness shouldn't exist. We left our home in India because the Hindus and Sikhs had started looting and killing.*"

The crucial difference for Ayesha Begum, however, between leaving home in 1948 and the series of displacement in the 1990s was that "Liaqat Ali Khan Sahib was alive at that time. He helped us a great deal. We were provided with mats and ration." As she elaborated later on in the interview when I asked her if and how it was possible to put a stop to the conflict in Karachi:

*If Liaqat Ali Khan or Quaid-i-Azam had lived a little longer ... there would not have been such killings and destruction. When the heads of the state keep on changing abruptly, it causes destruction just like it has happened.*

This perspective was analogous to Ayesha's presentation of the trials and tribulations faced by herself and her children, first because of her husband's ten year long chronic illness, and later on because of his death:

*... when their father could not get well, the children started doing petty jobs. Our children could not get educated. Whatever material came from the factory, my daughters and myself cleaned that and cut its threads. This is how our children were brought up. They studied and learnt their work alongside each other. ... there are still three to be married. ... There is neither my husband nor any guardian to take care of them. One year after the death of my husband, my son was murdered, and since then I have been ill.*

Things fall apart at home as well as in the nation-state when fathers were absent or ineffectual:

*... a house is destroyed without its head. ... At times it is said to vote for this and then for that. ... Now the military is in rule; perhaps they might give us justice. They should slash the prices, so that the poor might earn their bread peacefully.*

Ayesha Begum's conception of the authority figure necessary to ensure safety and well-being was gendered and ethnicized. Bhutto, a woman and a Sindhi, of rural feudal origins, served as the foil for the first rulers of Pakistan, male, Urdu-speaking immigrants from India, embodying the spirit of the educated, civilized urban elite.<sup>45</sup> Ayesha Begum said she returned home when Sharif, a Punjabi male, came into power, but in pinning her hopes on Musharraf's army regime, Ayesha Begum was expressing her confidence in a man and in a fellow Hindustani. The Pakistani state had let her down earlier, but that was only because the ruler did not have the right credentials.

In a similar vein, Ayesha Begum's dissatisfaction with her own marriage or the realization that her married daughters were not happy did not lead to a dismissal of marriage as a worthwhile institution. She

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44 See Shaikh (1997) for the impact of police and army action against supposed MQM activists and their communities in the 1990s. Also see Amnesty International Reports on Pakistan.

45 See earlier section. See Tan and Kudaisya (2000) and Shaikh (1997) for detailed accounts of the origins and history of the Sindhi-Mohajir strife.

wanted her youngest daughter to earn a higher degree and make some money, so she could be independent in the eventuality “that her husband turned out to be bad.” At the same time, Ayesha Begum was on the lookout for a match for her daughter with an appropriate Hindustani with a “government job or his own house.” Yet, to view Ayesha Begum’s stance on the state and marriage as indicative of her inability to think beyond the status quo, in spite of her defiance, would be too simplistic a reading of the matter. In adhering to societal imperatives for marriage and locating the potential for positive change in the state apparatuses, if they were “manned” by those who shared her ethnic affiliation, Ayesha Begum was crafting a vision of life for herself and her loved ones within the constraints and opportunities afforded for well-being and safety by existing power structures.

Using ethnicity as a building-block for self-constitution, as a citizen-subject, and as a mother, enabled Ayesha Begum to achieve agency in a context where the politics of ethnic identity, at local and national levels, even when not made explicit, remained overpowering.<sup>46</sup> Ayesha Begum and her family experienced physical violence because they were Hindustanis and/or *Mohajirs*. Also, a space for contesting the relentless structural violence impacting her life was available through a politicized reworking of the Hindustani identity, thanks largely to the MQM. In Ayesha Begum’s life-world, the possibilities of other forms of coalitions and alliances, where other modalities, such as class or gender, could be utilized as grounds of mobilization, remained minimal, ironically, because of the gendered and classed nature of her reality. Despite enjoying the relative mobility of an older woman living in an urban metropolis, there were still restrictions on Ayesha Begum’s freedom. These gender-based boundaries, hand-in-hand with the class-based experiences of a problematic transport system, limited her contact to the people sharing her ethnic affiliation, since they were the ones who shared her physical space, a circumstance arranged and facilitated by the powers-that-be.

Still, the limited interaction with people from other ethnic backgrounds only partially accounted for Ayesha Begum’s blatant ethnocentrism: “*I don’t know where have these people of various ethnicities come from and settled in Karachi ... In fact the situation got worse as more and more races moved in here.*” At another point in the interview, Ayesha Begum attributed the conflict in Karachi to the ethnocentrism evidenced in people of different ethnicities. When I asked her if she was ethnocentric, she replied, “*Earlier on my children and myself were all right, but since the death of my husband and my son I have become so.*” Reconstituting the self after violence shattered it apart had also involved incorporating some form of that violence into the process of reconstitution. An acknowledgement of class-based suffering was a salient theme in Ayesha Begum’s representation of her life. She did recognize, for instance, that “*it is the children of the poor who get murdered,*” even if “*poor and rich Hindustanis are all harassed by policemen of other ethnicities.*” The implications of Ayesha Begum’s highly ethnicized agency, as a poor mother, and as a citizen subject, in a postcolonial context of violence does not allow for either valorization or romanticization. Neither, however, can this agency be disavowed, if we want to think with/through Ayesha Begum’s life in all its complexity.

### **Mehr-un-Nisa**

We sat in one of two rooms in a house that was made of a mixture of baked and unbaked bricks. The only two articles in the room were the straw mat and a brass glass. While Mehr-un-Nisa and I talked, her mother lay on the side, a newspaper rolled into a pillow underneath her head, occasionally fanning herself with another newspaper. At times, she would interject into the conversation, but Mehr-un-Nisa was my primary respondent. Mehr-un-Nisa assiduously answered all my questions, but her answers, even to my broadly framed queries, were brief, and to the point. I was struck, however, by her wisdom, for her

46 I touch upon this issue in the section entitled “On Karachi’s Conflict.” See Verkaaik (2001).

somewhat terse responses were uttered after careful deliberation. I also noted a deep sadness in her eyes, which was in contrast to the haziness I could see in her mother's gaze. Mehr-un-Nisa told me, in the course of the interview, that the doctor gave her mother sleeping pills to help her with the psychological illness that had set in after her brother's death.

Mehr-un-Nisa dropped out of school four years before the interview after her older brother, Iqbal, was killed. Her family could no longer afford her education, since Iqbal was the chief breadwinner. Iqbal had quit school after his matriculation (tenth standard), to take on the job in a shop where electronics were repaired, since their father's health had started to deteriorate, and he could not work everyday. Her father, who was seventy years old at time of the interview, had first worked in a lawyer's office, but for the past ten years, had been working, at a salary of a hundred rupees per day (approximately \$2.00) for the Nimco Center, a store where they sold savory snacks. Her mother had never worked outside the home. Her brother, who was a year younger than her, dropped out school after their older brother died as well, but could only find temporary part-time work. Three of the four younger sisters went to school, but the fourth "can not learn anything" after the death of her brother, so she stopped going to school. Mehr-un-Nisa and her sisters contributed to the household income by sewing clothes for people in the neighborhood, but sewing jobs were only available intermittently, usually around the times of festivals.

Although the presence of Mehr-un-Nisa, the sister and daughter, was felt during Mehr-un-Nisa's representation of her life before her brother died, it was in the post-violent context of her life that these selves, and, hence, her relationships with her immediate family, seemed to become all-consuming. When asked if she had any friends, Mehr-un-Nisa replied, "After my brother's death, we ended contact with everybody."

Lubna: What were your feelings at your brother's sudden death?

Mehr-un-Nisa: I fainted. I had no consciousness.

Lubna: What happened after you gained consciousness?

Mehr-un-Nisa: I was very sad after seeing my brother's face. Our brother had gone out after eating food ... at 1 o'clock at night we saw his dead face.

Mehr-un-Nisa was under a doctor's care for a few weeks after her brother was buried. She had to terminate the treatment, since the medicines were too expensive, and her mother's cure was the priority. Her mother, however, had barely recovered since then. Since Iqbal's death she had not been able continue the job of running the household. Mehr-un-Nisa and her older sister took on the responsibility for household chores, while her sister had the additional task of taking care of their mother. After her sister's wedding, which took place a month before I interviewed her, Mehr-un-Nisa was in-charge of the home and her mother's care. Mehr-un-Nisa, the sister, reasserted herself in the face of emptiness, and an aborted desire:

Lubna: ... you cannot go to college in your father's income. Did you think about working for the exam as a private student who could study at home?

Mehr-un-Nisa: I have thought about it a lot of times, but they say leave it.

Lubna: Who says leave it?

Mehr-un-Nisa: The heart and mind say that. The rest of the sisters should study, and we should try to get them educated.

Lubna: When you left school, did anyone, a teacher, come to find out why?

Mehr-un-Nisa: Give the fee, then study. Otherwise not.

Lubna: Was there a way for you to get a scholarship?

Mehr-un-Nisa: No, nobody said anything.

Mehr-un-Nisa: I wanted to become a doctor. It was not fated to happen.

Lubna: Were you studying science?

Mehr-un-Nisa: Yes.

Lubna: Why did you want to become a doctor?

Mehr-un-Nisa: When I used to see Dr. Khurshid, I would get that desire.

Lubna: What was it about Dr. Khurshid that you liked?

Mehr-un-Nisa: He talks very wisely. His words are very good. That is why I thought I should become a doctor. Then one of our teachers was becoming a doctor. She has become a doctor. She used to live in this block. Now she has gone to the city.

For Mehr-un-Nisa, the desire to become a doctor had represented attaining wisdom and the chance to move to the city, a move symbolizing upward mobility, and perhaps freedom from class and gender-based constraints.

Towards the end of the interview, when asked if it was possible to bring peace to Karachi, she answered, *“If we get good education and good jobs, then maybe all this will end.”* Very early in the conversation, when I asked her for an analysis of who was responsible for the violence, she replied succinctly, *“It is the whole society’s fault. We should give our children pens, not guns.”*

Mehr-un-Nisa’s selves as sister and daughter were fundamentally relational selves, deriving their agency through identification with various family members. Hierarchical power relations structured the parameters of relationality as well the agency it enabled. Mehr-un-Nisa’s reminiscences about her brother, Iqbal, as the one who “was very humorous”, and without whom “the evenings do not seem like evenings anymore,” for “when he used to come home, it was great,” pointed to the joy he brought her. However, the relationship with Iqbal was imbued with meanings drawn from specific patriarchal constructions of what it meant to be a good brother or a good sister in Mehr-un-Nisa’s family. Iqbal worked outside the home in order to provide for the family. He was also the one to escort his sisters to school, or wherever the girls went. For Mehr-un-Nisa, he was also a window to that other world of seeming openness and liberty, and listening to his stories about work, and the people he met, afforded a vicarious pleasure. In turn, Mehr-un-Nisa, as would have behooved a good sister, reciprocated by personally taking care of Iqbal’s needs at home.

Although Mehr-un-Nisa identified herself as ethnically *Mohajir*, it was the classed and gendered dimensions of her selves that came to the forefront in the interview. She did inhabit an ethnicized space, for all her neighbors were *Mohajir*, and her family was strict about finding matches within the *Mohajir* community. Her friends at school, however, had been *Mohajir*, Punjabi, and Pathan. She preferred to remain immersed in her housework, and not engage with the world around her. *“Sometimes, when I think then my mind goes crazy, that why are there so many killings in the last three four years. Why is this happening?”* While Mehr-un-Nisa’s relative isolation, in physical and mental terms, was the outcome of circumstances interfacing with structures, it was also, to a certain degree, a preference, representing a coping mechanism in a life-world rendered unfamiliar and chaotic by violence: *“It did not seem like this was Orangi Town anymore. Everyday, all the time, we heard the noise of firing.”*

Mehr-un-Nisa also appeared disinterested in her family’s history. She knew very little about her parents’ migration to Karachi around the time when East Pakistan declared its independence as Bangladesh, and

knew nothing at all about her family's first migration from the Indian state of Bihar to East Pakistan in 1947 (her mother told me they were from Bihar). When I asked her if she ever asked her parents about their lives before they moved to Karachi, she simply stated, "*We have got everything here, so what is the point in asking about it.*" Her mother responded in a comparable, though slightly more definitive tone, when I asked her if she shared stories from her previous homes with her children, "*They do not want to hear about it. I do not want to talk about it. We are here now.*" A pact seemed to exist, across generations, whereby the past was deemed redundant, irrelevant, or taboo.

On the whole, the interview with Mehr-un-Nisa left me with an overwhelming impression of the starkness of it all: Mehr-un-Nisa's unembellished words; her mother's uncompromising grief and letting go of life after her son's death; the unqualified sadness in Mehr-un-Nisa's eyes; the austerity of the room where the interview took place; the harshness of the physical violence that can ravage a family; and the unmitigated burden of continuing an existence in an unjust, unfair, and inequitable world. Mehr-un-Nisa came across as a determined young woman, but her determination manifested itself in striving towards the absolute acceptance of the limits in her life. This determination was based on a realistic appraisal, from the vantage point of her knowledge and social positionality, of the gendered, classed, and violent world around her.

If consciousness could be simply equated with agency, then, Mehr-un-Nisa was an agent, not just in her role as sister and daughter or through her assumption of a self-contained persona, but also in her attempt to make sense of her place in the world she inhabited. However, from Mehr-un-Nisa's perspective, these particular exercises of agency: the diligent realization of household responsibilities, the self-imposed isolation, and the consciousness of limits, were the aftermath of a brother's untimely death in an unjust system, that not only allowed that death but, then, made no provisions to support the healing and financial stability of her family.

## Conclusion

This paper adds to the body of literature that explores the nature and scope of women's agency in conflict situations, (for instance, Khattak, 2001; Manchanda, 2001; Moser and Clark, 2001), through the scrutiny of two *Mohajir* women survivors enactments of selves in the light of macro socio-historical and political processes and structures. The interviews with Ayesha Begum and Mehr-un-Nisa revealed different experiences of direct and structural violence as well as different reactions and responses to those experiences. Although the reading/writing of these interviews was not meant to yield generalizations about the lives of *Mohajir* women survivors in Karachi, let alone women in all conflict situations, the glimpses and insights into the two women's lives raise some provocative issues about women's agency in contexts of armed conflict and violence in post-colonial nation-states, where processes of ethnic, class, and gender formation intersect with colonial histories and neo-colonial realities.

While Ayesha Begum's constructions of her self, suffering, and response to violence were grounded in history, Mehr-un-Nisa's reconstitution after the encounter with violence involved a professed detachment from history. This difference, to a certain extent, could be attributed to the age disparity between the two women. After all, Ayesha Begum had witnessed the Partition violence, personally undertaken the migration to Karachi, lived through the time of *Mohajir* ascendancy and decline, and was determined to ensure the betterment of her children, despite her own deprivations in the present and the past. Also as a married woman with a sick husband, and later as a widow with children, she had enjoyed a higher degree of mobility and decision-making, and had, therefore, been exposed to various opinions and perspectives in her interactions with various people. Mehr-un-Nisa was born in Karachi, too young to remember the intricacies

of the politics underpinning the *Mohajir* identity, and as a young unmarried woman, with more restrictions on her movement, was afforded little opportunity for exposure to varied perspectives. Also, as a young woman she remained more invested in her personal future, and the present, rather than the past, offered an apparently more useful point of departure. Mehr-un-Nisa's disengagement from history, however, also stemmed from her family's way of dealing with their dual migration in 1947 and 1971, during two bloody partitions, each hailing the birth of a postcolonial nation-state. The erasure of the past, for Mehr-un-Nisa's parents, and herself, allowed for a fresh start with the prospect of a future where the violence would not repeat itself, even if the everyday reality of trying to survive with some measure of dignity in the present left very little room for future plans and aspirations.

Mehr-un-Nisa's turn inwards, her deepened introspection after her brother's death, was simultaneously a rejection of the primacy of history, and a bid to accept the stark reality of her limits without any illusions. In the context of a sociocultural context where her vision of the life she had wanted could not be realized, the reassertion of her agency took the shape of reworking herself as the perfect sister and daughter, integral to the smooth running of a household with very little resources, coping with death and illness. In spite of Mehr-un-Nisa's laudable courage and clarity, this exercise of her agency did serve to reinforce gendered modes of existence. Ayesha Begum, on the other hand, was vociferous in her protests against the direct and structural violence impacting her life, with history informing her project of self-constitution as citizen-subject and mother, placing her firmly within discourses of entitlement emanating from political quarters. Ayesha Begum's agency as ethnicized citizen-subject enabled her to speak out against the injustice perpetrated against herself and her family by state apparatuses and structures, but her utilization of a politics of identity defined by boundaries of hatred, albeit in a less virulent form, for her own purposes, had repercussions for the perpetuation of xenophobia in already violent geographies. Also, her agency exhibited through a trenchant critique of her circumstances had not led to a change in her circumstances, even if it had proved to be an effective survival mechanism. In the final analysis, neither Mehr-un-Nisa nor Ayesha Begum, despite their compelling personalities, and remarkable determination, could fulfill their desires, and the enactment of their agency had the potential to lead to an entrenchment of the violence, direct or structural, in their life-worlds.

The aim here is to raise the question of the viability of our constructs of agency as feminists of color writing/theorizing women's agency in dire circumstances, as we attempt to debunk the myths of passive Third World women by paying attention to the agency and resistance of Third World women Mohanty's (1988). While in accordance with the importance of effecting a change in discursive representations of Third World women, I also want to reiterate Abu-Lughod's (1990) proposal that the everyday forms of women's subversions be used as a point of entry to study the working of power relations. How can our alliances with women like Mehr-un-Nisa and Ayesha Begum, who might not even consider alliances with the likes of us as useful, help us work towards postcolonial futures where agency does not merely translate into mere survival?

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