1 The accursed ghazal occupies a specific but significant place in Pakistan's socio-cultural milieu. Specific, because its subject concerns women - particularly those of a certain ilk, and significant because despite excluding men from this aesthetic and speculative enterprise, it does little to prevent them from talking about it. And talk about it, they do. Talk of the accursed ghazal accumulates and is pervasive, like a room full of smoke. It seeps into houses, travels up buildings, circles schools, hovers near universities, floats around churches, and spirals mosques; free to travel where it likes.

The origin of the accursed ghazal is something of a challenge and the citizenry, at some point, took matters into their own hands. They constructed and continue to add to a formidable edifice of apocrypha that is a radix for fantasists and scholars, and will likely remain so in the years to come. The creation of dubious and at times entirely fictitious histor(y)/(ies) was a misguided yet earnest attempt to dispel some of the enigma that surrounded the accursed ghazal. Initially, there was talk of jadoo - mostly of the kaala variety, practiced by churels and pichal peris in treacherous collusion - supposed to have engendered the accursed ghazal as part of a poisonous plot to entrap men. In reality - as will be revealed - the accursed ghazal's sole interest *is* women, and all the supernatural schemes attributed to its creation are likely the product of minds afflicted with, what is referred to in current parlance as, *"fomo"*.

Irrespective, talk of curses and hexes floated about in the country, embroiled as it was in an unmistakable romance with suspicion. Thus the tapestry, to explain the persistence of the pernicious poem, is rich in detail. [cont.]

1

Afsar, Khurshid and Riasat Ahmad were sisters born in 1899, 1902 and 1905 in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Daughters of a school teacher who taught at La Martinière College, their father encouraged them to pursue subjects that struck their fancy. The girls exhibited an interest in writing early on and excelled at English and Composition. Later, as anti-imperialist forces began to foment and froth in the subcontinent, the Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin emerged, which the three sisters joined in 1936. The movement specialized in the realist tradition of writing, which its proponents believed served as a vehicle for social change.

Despite practicing the same tradition, the three diverged in their choice of form, with Afsar preferring the ghazal;[1] Khurshid inclined to the afsana and Riasat interested in the novel.[2] Writing prolifically at the end of the thirties and throughout the early forties, the Hussains' drew comparisons with the Brontes', sans tuberculosis. Partition had a profound impact on their psyche, as they narrowly escaped becoming victim to the widespread sexual violence that marked the event. Haunted by images of empty havelis and blood-stained trains, the sisters were permanently febrile in the aftermath of Partition and took to the bottle to soothe their nervy constitutions. They drank for years, with their drawing room playing host to all manner of deviants, vagrants and rabble-rousers.

[cont.] Some attempts at understanding the origin of the poem's existence, tried to gain legitimacy through the laurels of the person making the effort. Dr. Asad Firdous, Chair of the Department of English at the University of Punjab, offers his views on the matter in the only literary supplement published in the country, *"Scribes and Stories"*. His short essay, more conjecture than anything concrete, documents what he learnt during an encounter with the renowned historian on South Asian history, Raaz K. Taurpur. Taurpur claims the myth of the accursed ghazal arose in the nineteenth century, when an acclaimed poet was confronted with allegations of literary theft – the poet was considered one of the best practitioners of the Urdu ghazal. The allegations were levelled by a highly respected courtesan called Fakhrunnisa, rumoured to be a lover of the poet in question. Although Fakhrunnisa was deeply devoted to the poet, the latter's jealous grudge set in motion a devastating scheme that would ruin the lives of many, in the decades to come. The trouble begins amidst smoke and gunfire, during the Siege of Lucknow in 1857.

2 Afsar's fourth novel, *Shaam-e-Intishaar* (1952) met with widespread condemnation upon publication. It presents a controversial yet moving fictional account of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru's relationship as lovers in pre-Partition India. The break-up of the relationship is used as the catalyst that set off the chain of events culminating in Partition. Despite being written under a pseudonym, Afsar was subject to a protracted obscenity trial that had an extremely adverse impact on her health.

Khurshid published a collection of short stories *Aik lakeer, sau afsane* in 1951. The collection contained impressionistic sketches about women during the eruptions of communal violence in 1947. The stories were varied and chronicled the migration of female labourer from Kasur; the mad antics of a Begum decked in Polki diamonds singing, *"Yahan badla wafa ka bewafai ke siva kya hai"* in the twilight of the fourteenth and the fifteenth, and the suicide of a school teacher travelling on a train from Kolkata to Dhaka. The frank and graphic descriptions of violence assured notoriety for all the sisters and helped Riasat secure an offer from Khurshid's publisher, Kavneer Singh. [3] A budding poet eternally on the brink of success, Singh publicly disavowed the sisters but was privately delighted by the public's two-faced interest, as manifested in record sales.

Fresh off the back of this mixed success, the trio eased up on work and began hosting successive bacchanals where attendees noticed a change in Riasat. She could be found standing straight and was fixated on the crystal chandelier in the drawing room, always past the witching hour, muttering misras from a ghazal that everyone thought was part of her upcoming divan. After a few more occasions of the same possessed performance, Afsar asked Riasat if she was alright. Baffled by the question, it soon was apparent that Riasat was utterly clueless about the nocturnal recitals taking place. Riasat asked her sisters to listen carefully to whatever she was rambling next time. The following night, as Riasat stood under the blue light of the chandelier, her two sisters listened to her.

3 Speaking of Singhs', Parambir Singh, unrelated to Kavneer, was Fakhrunnisa's favourite lover and a rebel sepoy and combatant in the Siege. With an erect bearing and madness of spirit that wove itself into the wiry disarray of his beard, Parambir belonged to a cadre of should-have-been-greats: men destined but ultimately unable to achieve greatness. The sepoy was part of the revolt led by Begum Hazrat Mahal against the colonial authorities because Parambir's soul sought refuge in the promise of revolution. As the British defended the Residency in Lucknow, Parambir stole away in the cover of night to ask Fakhrunnisa for pecuniary assistance.

She intoned:

"My thirst for drink begins, as my fears clamour and din
Pray pour one to the very brim, oh kind Saqi!"

Although Afsar and Khurshid stood next to her for a significant period of time - much to the amusement of their crapulent guests who were singing[4] the chorus of "Ghungroo bajne lagay" a popular song from a local horror-comedy called *Aadhi Raat* - they soon realised she was repeating different versions of the same sher. Leaving Riasat to her own devices, the sisters decided to deal with the matter in the morning. After being apprised of the previous night's developments, Riasat went from being confused to upset, as the sher shed light on her chief anxieties of not being able to meet the deadline set by her publisher and of drinking too much. She also realised something that she didn't immediately tell her sisters.

Riasat heard voices, or rather had started hearing a voice that urged her to finish her ghazals. Now this wasn't any ordinary voice but some other-worldly force that had taken residence in her head. Frightened, Riasat took to drowning out the voice by drowning herself in whiskey. It was the beginning of a vicious and fatal cycle.[5] Afsar and Khurshid were at a loss as to what to do. They were unable to hear the voice driving Riasat mad and put down her talk of voices as too much of the devil's brew. They tried cutting her consumption and increasing their own - "Ab baat suno, this liquor isn't going to finish itself. Might as well drink it even if she can't," Afsar said, alluding to the six month supply of alcohol they'd recently purchased.

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4 Regaling guests at the kotha with her vocal dexterity, Fakhrunnisa was mid-performance when the chaudharyan Mehr Taj, entered the room and whispered in her ear. The poet, also present at the time, understood the gravity of the situation as Fakhrunnisa, wordlessly left the room; an unmistakable breach in the rigid codes of hospitality and civility adhered to by courtesans. He later corroborated his suspicion that the courtesan generously proffered Parambir a large sum of money. The poet was profligate about both money and ill-will, and still smarting from the denial of a loan from Fakhrunnisa, a few weeks prior. Angered by what he perceived as a betrayal of affection, the poet in a green fit of rage, revealed Fakhrunnisa's role in the rebellion to the colonial authorities. The authorities, eager for an opportunity to assert their purported civilizational superiority and prudish mores, were quick to crack down on kothas in the aftermath of the Siege. Fakhrunnisa's kotha was particularly scrutinised. And this was not all. The contagion of Victorian England's "Diseases Act" spread across the subcontinent and the courtesans of Lucknow were subject to Pecksniffian pokes and prods at the hands of a frenzied Empire, running wild on evangelizing power and hypocrisy.

5 Taurpur asserts that Fakhrunnisa was ill-equipped to deal with the stark reversal of fortune in the years following the Siege. Word of the authorities' monitoring of the kotha spread like wildfire. While the act of visiting the kotha was not a source of shame, patrons felt uncomfortable being spied on by the British and visits became infrequent. As patronage dwindled, the courtesan fell into a deep depression, compounded by Parambir's imprisonment [cont.] [cont.] She frantically pursued avenues to secure his freedom, deploying the clout she had accrued over the years, to little effect. Parambir languished in jail for many months before succumbing to tuberculosis, an unlucky inheritance from a fellow inmate. With little income, a dead lover and few prospects, Fakhrunnisa in a moment of dark optimism thought things couldn't get any worse when an acquaintance informed her of the poet's deception.

The results were catastrophic. Afsar, already involved in a legal quagmire concerning her last novel, needed no excuse to drink more. Recent violence against Ahmedis was a bitter reminder of the menace that characterised partition. The murder of Afsar's friend Abdul, during a riot against Ahmedis in March 1953, made matters worse and worsened her night terrors. Bodies - it was always bodies – black, blue, broken and beaten to a pulp, stacked one on top of the other, rising to dizzying heights. She'd read a story by a famous American novelist and one line had acquired a sick echo: "the dead grow larger each day." Afsar drank to dispel[6] these visions and the moment she increased her intake was when the trouble started.

Under these circumstances, it was only inevitable that Afsar fell prey to the phantom machinations that besieged Riasat. Much to Khurshid's dismay, both her sisters could now be found under the blue light of the chandelier, reciting a ghazal that no one had heard before. Khurshid was beside herself with worry. The guests became infrequent while the liquor poured freely. Locked in a house with two sisters whose moments of malady outnumbered those of sanity, Khurshid watched helplessly as a hypnotic force played puppeteer and drove her sisters mad. She drank as she watched their pantomime, paying little regard to work, as scraps of her stories gathered the dust of neglect. Her worries had also been compounded by accusations of plagiarism[7] levelled by a rival writer from across the border, Tenneti Acchamamba. A prolific writer and translator (she had recently finished

6 When the courtesan heard of the poet's betrayal, her instinct was to reach for the bottle. But Fakhrunnisa was a woman with tremendous pride and resolved that this would cost the poet. Now, the poet - like all poets - was both vain and frivolous with the additional limitation of meager talent. Early in their courtship, he deduced that Fakhrunnisa was a woman of great learning and skill. Realising her affection could be manipulated, he enlisted the courtesan's services to improve his craft. In fact, Fakhrunnisa was responsible for re-working and animating the poet's dull drafts and for moulding them into poignant poems, worthy of veneration. Without her discerning eye, the poet's ghazals were nugatory couplets lacking unity. His perfervid nature, well-suited to the role of lover, was ill-suited in demonstrating the surgical precision required of the greatest poets. Thus, the poems employed a hackneyed idiom of love that doomed them to the realm of parody had the courtesan not elevated them. But just because she had elevated his poetry before, didn't mean she couldn't upset his fortunes after.

7 Fakhrunnisa chose a select few to spread word of the poet's literary fraud and provided them with drafts written in her hand to validate the claim. In particular, she entrusted the most damning papers to, Zauq, poet laureate of the moth-eaten Mughal empire. With Bahadur Shah Zafar the Second in exile in Rangoon, Zauq was enervated by British defeat and repulsed by his friend's treachery. He took it upon himself to spread the news and soon enough, all of Lucknow was atitter with news of the poet's deceit. Shunned from drawing rooms, exiled from kothas and snickered at in alleyways, Fakhrunnisa's scheme was a success. The poet, irate but resigned to the hand dealt to him, vanished never to be heard again; although the ghazals thanks to Fakhrunnisa - enjoyed a longevity that his ignominy did not. Lauded as one of the finest poets in the tradition of the Urdu ghazal, his poetry lives on in textbooks, while India and Pakistan, always looking to brawl, assert claims of sole ownership. The truth is that the poems, if the poems belong to anyone, belong to Fakhrunnisa.

translating the third volume of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* into Telugu), Acchamamba, who lived in what was then Pondicherry, had written a voluble note to Khurshid, replete with expletives, accusing her of stealing an idea for a short story. The two had met the previous year at a seminar organized by the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on Partition writers and had exchanged ideas, contact information along with some pleasantries. Khurshid was quite baffled by the accusation and tried to think if she had inadvertently pilfered an idea from the Indian writer. She was thinking about this one evening when her sisters began their performance. Khurshid sipped her drink[8] and in a moment of morbid frivolity, stood up to join her sisters, mimicking their whispers and poker straight stance.

As she mouthed incoherent nothings in jest, Khurshid heard the voice: deep, sneering, female. It told Khurshid terrible things about her future. Visions of ruin and damnation, all unless Khurshid could finish an incomplete ghazal that the voice recited. Khurshid was at a loss. She thought, "Aye Khuda, there's something black in the-" and began reciting against her will. The house descended into mayhem. The sisters were driven mad by the voice and could be found in their home in Model Town, walking through halls ceaselessly, muttering and shrieking shers from a ghazal that no one could recognise. So they perished, one after the other, never to write or publish again.

8 Fakhrunnisa was drinking heavily. There was little else to be done. Empty bottles accumulated in her room, rising till they formed a glass fortress to protect her. The vessels were varied: honey amber flasks, olive-green onion bottles, peacock-blue pear-shaped containers, tape-gin bottles of apple-green, long-necked ones with tints of amethyst, squat crystal decanters with jewel topped stoppers of ruby and yellow topaz and non-descript stoneware that bore the remains of the previous night. Fakhrunnisa looked at her muted reflection in the glass that encircled her and with time that reflection became a shadow; the courtesan aged. Not merely her countenance but her heart. Once vibrant and pulsating, it settled to the muted beat of a person biding their time. The courtesan was hosting her own wake.

Sakina Rangoonwala's father, Salman Rangoonwala, had a proclivity towards violence - or what he called discipline - when it came to matters concerning his children. For Mr. Rangoonwala was a self-made man, a successful barrister who had politely and pointedly declined the security of his vast family fortune. While this decision had an impact on their father's spiritual trajectory, it also meant that the Rangoonwala children were subject to repeated narrations of a colourless mythology of moral rectitude. At a young age, Sakina and the rest of her siblings learnt - five that they were - that the best way to avoid their father's wrath was by sitting as still as gargoyles - without the frozen, grotesque expressions, of course. However, Sakina, who was born in 1978, was from the first instance a loud and brash baby.[9] Weighing a hefty eleven pounds, she was keen to exit the womb and came into the world after five hours of labour. While the exit was relatively swift, her entrance was marked with bawling braggadocio that demanded everyone's unequivocal attention.

This baby would be heard.

In a prescient but ultimately futile attempt to mitigate the turbulence to follow, her mother - a withdrawn woman from interior Sind - named her Sakina: an Arabic name meaning peace and tranquillity. Educated at Mama Parsi Girls' Secondary School in Karachi, Sakina demonstrated remarkable ability and finished *Midnight's Children* and *Satanic Verses* at age ten. Admittedly, she never spoke of having read the latter as she'd surreptitiously procured a copy from her irreverent Uncle Jaffer, who'd smuggled it into the country along with bottles containing a strange amber liquid. As Sakina grew up, this flouting of rules,

9 After a poisoning of more than twenty years, the courtesan on the verge of death, was resting in her room.

conventions and nebulous constructions of decency became less an act of rebellion and more a part of character. If tasked in school to recite Sonnet LXXXVI by Shakespeare, she'd return the next day reciting "Daddy" by Plath. An enterprising teacher, sensing her unfettered energy required direction rather than discipline pointed her to the poetry of Parveen Shakir and Kishwar Naheed. Urdu, a historically imperial language at war with regional actors, still had a touch of the exotic to Sakina who had grown up in an English-speaking household.[10]

Confronted with a language she vaguely understood but had an inexplicable affinity for - or she was conditioned to believe she must have an inexplicable affinity for Urdu, as anything less would be a betrayal of some tenuous notion of authenticity - Sakina threw herself into the study of Urdu language and literature. It was not easy as she combatted idiomatic nuances beyond the pale and lexical gaps that try though she might she was unable to bound over. Accustomed to a social life that was ill-suited to the demands that accompany the serious pursuit of literature, Sakina became a recluse, setting out of the house only when necessity required. Short of donning perpetual white and choosing to communicate through closed doors, Sakina became something of a local mystery, with old friends and well-wishers utterly confused as to what prompted the change in lifestyle. They were at a loss as to where the old, rambunctious Sakina had gone.[11] At home, Sakina wrote a profuse amount of poetry, most of which was discarded upon completion. Anything short of sublime - a standard that ballooned in size with each passing day - was scrapped. In this fashion, all variety of her initial poems, particularly the copious amounts of juvenilia she had written,

10 She had moved out of the kotha years ago and lived in a dingy one-room apartment, above Hazratganj bazaar.

11 She went about her morning routine of a shower, breakfast and a few poems to shake off the lethargy of last night's drink, when a yellowing scrap fell from a book she was reading. It was a ghazal that she had written many years ago.

were incinerated by Sakina in a performance that appeared as if she was purging herself of her demons. In the meantime, Sakina took to perfecting her craft. She stumbled upon a book containing a basic taxonomy of poetic forms and soon she had tried her hand at as many as she could, returning to and writing once again in English. Her innate playfulness meant she instinctively took to doggerel, epigrams and limericks,[12] which she regarded as flotsam meant for recreation rather than posterity. She inscribed them on the walls and they were soon covered in a spider web of words that were routinely painted over when she ran out of space. More technically complex forms such as the alexandrine or the sonnet - she took to the Elizabethan quicker than the Petrarchan - terza rima and villanelle were staples in her daily writing schedule, practised with unfaltering and unfeeling determination on ream upon ream of paper.[13] A born and bred city-dweller, she eschewed the bucolic charm of pastoral poems for those concerned with urban ennui and produced many poems redolent of a certain Eliot. Ultimately though, Sakina knew all this work was in service for a higher cause: preparation for bigger, better things.

She persisted in her efforts, with an unfinished epic looming in the background, half-done sestinas snaking their way through her mind colliding with other word-forms in varied states of evolution that sized each other up with raised letters and sneering punctuation. In time, Sakina began to write and complete poems with intent for publication and not mere practice. This did not mean that she sent them for publication but that she now considered approaching publishers. She agonized over her latest stack of poetry, accumulating a glut of scrap paper that

12 An example of Sakina's verse:

"I believe my family thinks I'm mad,
If I leave the house, they'll be very glad.
But I'm a genius writing a book,
At the moment, it's gobbledegook
And so I write verse that's pretty bad."

13 Keen on recycling, Sakina sold the scrap-poems, as she referred to them, to her local raddiwala. In the years after her death, an urban legend spread that some poems were still in circulation due to the sheer extent of her output coupled with the local custom of fashioning paper into packets for samosas, pakoras and chips. Many a grease-soaked packet's contents have been quickly dispensed with to determine whether it contained something valuable, always to the treasure-seeker's disappointment. A few imposter poems gained currency over the years but were eventually debunked by scholars of Sakina's work and graphologists.

provided the finished poems company, as she painstakingly fashioned and refashioned them each day. At nights she lay in bed, counting down the minutes until she could resume work and was plagued by thoughts of phantom reviewers with unfavourable reviews: "Ms. Rangoonwala's debut has the distinction of being overwrought and facile simultaneously. A feat of unparalleled mediocrity." These fears provided Sakina with a perverse sense of motivation, one that desired to know how she would fare in the world, once she had finished her first collection.

After twelve years of scholastic seclusion and hundreds of ballpoints that had whittled much of her brain and vitality, Sakina was left with a fragile sheaf of poetry that combined both English and Urdu titled *Ooper neechay, agay Nietzsche*. Her return to the public eye in 2008 was orchestrated through a poorly organized book launch at one of the many coffee-house franchises that dotted the commercial landscape like a profusion of commas.[14] Although the turnout was sizable, technical problems accompanied by load-shedding meant that a large portion of her reading was spent in a dark room with poor acoustics and frequent phone beeps. Mildly annoyed despite the crowd's loud applause at the end, Sakina made her way towards the organizer who insisted that she come to her house afterwards for a meet-and-greet with the city's cognoscenti: socialites, journalists, bloggers and a smattering of the designated upcoming and young.

Driving to the party, Sakina had a sense of foreboding but dismissed it, thinking she could do with some gratifying if questionable adulation; it was not every day that one was flavour of the month. At the party, hosted by

14 The day Fakhrunnisa wrote the ghazal, the poet and her had been bickering over the behr of a particular couplet.

Daisy Wadia - social racketeer par excellence - Sakina was fawned over as desired - "Darling, we *need* to send her to Jaipur. Tell those bloody Indians we have our own crop of talent here!" – Until she had an encounter that unsettled her.[15]

Introduced to and having forgotten the line-up of individuals she had just met, Sakina stole away to Daisy's moonlit terrace to catch a breath. A lanky woman stood there, languidly blowing smoke rings towards the sea. Asking if she might have a cigarette - her first in years, as was evident from the immediate staccato that followed - the two exchanged banalities when the other woman, Sassi, exclaimed, "Ah, wait, so you're the poet!"[16] Having displayed the correct measure of self-deprecation necessary for the success of such interactions, the women conversed. They spoke about the state of writing in Pakistan, the meagre opportunities afforded to women, the preponderance and impertinence of journalists masquerading as writers (a phenomenon Sassi took curious and violent exception to) and the significance of an oral storytelling tradition in a country with low literacy. The conversation reached a brief lull after a particularly rapid exchange, the sort of lull that makes people of a certain disposition uneasy for no good reason. Sakina shifted her weight and looked to the moon, wondering what to say when Sassi asked,

"Tawahn pehnji madri zaban main cho natha likho?"[17]

"Sorry, I don't understand what you're saying,"

"You don't speak Sindi?"

"No, my mother never taught us,"

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15 The syllable she had casually identified as superfluous had taken on monstrous proportions and proved to be a sore point for the poet who insisted Fakhrunnisa was being unduly harsh.

16 The poet stormed off to the window, and the courtesan realised his querulous display of petulance might be the result of something other than a syllable.

17 She asked if there was something on his mind and the poet relented, telling her he'd received the galley proof of his kulliyat last evening

"That's a shame. Imagine if you could throw in some Sindi in your poetry!"

An anodyne observation, presented less as barb and more as conjecture, there was still something about Sassi's statement that profoundly troubled Sakina. Perhaps, it was the fact that it was never going to be enough. None of it. And this was not about other people and their expectations, but her own. She would never be content and there would always be something wanting, undone, or absent. Sakina then understood that life was a series of accidents amounting to the realisation that you were never the person you once hoped to be, and absorbed all the sadness of the world in her big, black eyes. It was not meant to be. She excused herself and went inside, only to be confronted with a cacophony of soiree staples: loud arguments, cooing calls from across the room, disembodied curses and salutations, shoe-shuffling and heel-clicking, the sharp fall of glass. She needed a drink. Sakina scanned the room and made her way towards the refreshments table. Ignoring the bewildered barkeep, she reached for the nearest bottle - gin – and a voice, not her own and not the barkeeper's, issued a firm "Don't!" Sakina considered the proposition for a split second and then made off with the bottle.[18]

Driving home later that night with a half-empty bottle nestled between her legs, she had a car accident. Two passengers were in the other car: a man and his eleven year old, both of whom died immediately. In an aleatory trick of fate, when a dazed Sakina burst through the windshield at the moment of impact, hurtling through the air, her bloodied hand made contact with that of the boy's as it flung out the window of the car in the same instant. The macabre high-five, like ships passing in the

18 Lamenting misquotations, spelling mistakes and a litany of errors that riddled the manuscript, the poet launched a diatribe against perversion contaminating art due to new technologies. Motivated by a healthy sense of emasculation, the poet, in a rare moment of inspiration, recited a couplet:

What is worse, with my verse, I sell my soul too,
But first, I source a buyer, who shares my worldview!"

Pleased and distracted by his flash of artistry, the poet gathered his papers and left to go meet the printers.

night, was the last time young Abbas would exchange such a gesture with a human being. When the paramedics and police arrived, apart from discovering the dead and bloodied corpses of the father and son, they were perturbed to discover a badly injured Sakina lying on the road, barely conscious but repeating words under her breath. One of the paramedics knelt towards her thinking she was trying to relay information concerning the accident, but after several minutes realised she was bizarrely reciting the following:

This torment began, with the slap of my father's hand,
Pray pour two, so I can stand, this grief, Saqi!

Sakina spent little to no time in prison, thanks to the law of blood money and unspoken law of privilege that governed the country. Her return to public life was cut short - although she had given Daisy Wadia and her cohort of society bigwigs enough fodder to fuel many a dinner party:

"A manslaughtering poet? Tauba, tauba!"

"Forget the man, it's the child, what was his name? Asif?"

"Can well call her the infanticidal poet?"

"Well he wasn't an infant, he was a child,"

"Patricide, matricide, filicide, fratricide – you realise, the murder of a child is so awful that there isn't even a specific word in English to describe it? I mean killing an infant is bad enough but killing a child means killing someone that's already begun their journey!"

And Sakina, for her part, more than happily retired to her home in Clifton.[19] She never published again but people who claimed to be close friends of the family, spoke of how she was working on her magnum opus, an epic poem that would erase all her sins. Some speculated it was a hybrid - "Do you think it might be a ghonnet?!" - while others alleged to have seen parts of it, claiming that Sakina had inscribed it on her walls with neon illustrations of women; a poem and art installation meant to be open to the public.

Irrespective of what she was writing, one point on which all agreed was that Sakina had not recovered after the boy's death and was unable to manage the anxiety of her insurmountable ambition. Some insisted that they met her - these stories were equally rooted in malice, gossip and boredom - and said that till her dying day, all she wanted to talk about, was her last poem.

Sakina Ragoonwala died on 12th June 2013 in Karachi.[20] When they found her, there was a paper with a half-written ghazal on her lap.[21] In the coming decades, city-dwellers reported sightings of Sakina – who morphed into a pichal peri in local folklore and was generously deployed as a cautionary tale for girls of fast and loose character. She could be seen with a half-empty bottle of gin or was holding a boy's hand as they walked ponderously into the darkness of eternity.[22]

19 The courtesan, however, disconcerted by all this talk of transactions and worth, was in an introspective mood.

20 Prior to this, she had never considered the value of her vocation.

21 It was a given, not a choice.

22 She got up to open the window.

23 She looked out the window absent-mindedly and picked up a pen lying idle on the table. Twisting it between her fingers, the tips of her hand tingled and the pen felt warm, as if it were perspiring. She rotated it in the air with force and her fingers moved with swiftness causing it to whirr. The pen's circuit stopped, as Fakhrunnisa clasped it in her palm and began pacing back and forth, muttering inchoate sentences. After a few heated stomps, she stood still but found that her body was gravitating towards the desk. The courtesan drummed the pen, her fingers flicking it to the beat of a continuous tattoo that rose louder and louder; the sound was insistent, nagging and demanding her attention. She didn't immediately realise it but in one of those epiphanous moments that are hard to come by, the courtesan thought, "Of course!"

3

Zeenat Marri was a poet from the Kalat district in the conflict-ridden province of Balochistan. Hailing from the Brahui speaking Marri tribe, Zeenat was born in 1961 and was the third daughter in a family of seven. Marri was twelve at the time of what historians contest as either the third or fourth Baloch uprising[23] against the Pakistani state, specifically, the Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto led government of 1973. To this end, the young girl was sent to Lahore to stay with friends of the family in order to ensure her safety. She was told to adopt the surname Zahir to deflect attention from her ethnic identity. Enrolled at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Zeenat developed a flair for theatre and poetry and was involved in many school productions over the years. Always looking for an opportunity to challenge authority, Zeenat shunned traditional school theatre, telling Sister Dominic – her school teacher and an Irish nun often amused by Zeenat's sass – "But I don't want to be in the Sound of Music! By the time things get interesting, the play ends. The von Trapps story of survival has got to be more interesting than their identical outfits and stupid songs!" She insisted on performing an impassioned if imperfect rendition of *Not I* by Samuel Beckett. Reporting for the school newspaper *The Veritable Weekly*, her precocious but prone to malapropisms classmate, Atiya Murad, categorized the performance as "memorizing and beyond the pail of anything seen in recent school productions. Ms. Zahir's puntilious (sic) adherence to Mr. Beckett's stage directions is a visceral experience for the audience, who are prissy to frothy and foaming ravings from an abyss that takes centre stage. Shrilling and terrifying."

Zeenat was seventeen and about to enter the official tedium of adulthood when General Zia-ul-Haq declared martial law after spearheading a coup called Operation Fair Play in 1977 - an apt demonstration of the Pakistani military's incomprehension of anything resembling irony – and assumed the role of President in 1978. It was then that Zeenat's guardians revealed the extent of her family's involvement in the insurgency, after which she reverted to her family surname, Marri. After this revelation, Zeenat was tormented by many questions, but primarily: Who was she?[24] Why hadn't her real family told her the truth about her relocation? Could she really trust her current guardians after they'd kept this matter a secret, all these years? Was she a class traitor, a blight on her tribe's honour? An inadvertent quisling, sitting in the heartland of the state, away from the resistance as her family sacrificed barrels of blood and tears for a better future? Even if she couldn't be blamed for past ignorance, she now knew the truth. Zeenat wrote livid missives to her brother demanding to know what role she could play in the future. Sensing the extent of her fury, he wrote a soothing letter, full of anecdotes of when they were young and calls for patience, hoping to placate his sister. He begged her to consider her sojourn in Lahore as an experiment in entryism. Her time too, would come.[25]

In trying to come to terms with her new identity, Zeenat immersed herself in activism[26] and joined the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy led by Benazir Bhutto. Despite having irreconcilable objections to Z. A. Bhutto's role in precipitating military action against the Baloch, Marri's distaste for dictatorship meant that she viewed any alliance and ceasefire between Zia-ul-Haq and the sardars with a cynical eye. She also took part in

24 She commenced writing. A plethora of matlas meandered in her mind as she examined each of them, turning them over and pulling them apart to see which would fit best. Various options for the radif appeared, reverberating and rolling in and out of sight, till she settled on one that would be the glue to bind the poem. Misras flew in and then out, marrying some to form shers, splitting from others to remain half-formed beings; swirling around forming a vortex of words, some of which she would repeat aloud, testing their timbre and pronouncing each word with varied pitch She wrote couplets, crossed words, wrote new ones, crossed them again, sometimes mid-word, pressing the tip of the pencil forcefully with her fingers, transmitting the intensity of her compulsion until finally, exhausted from an hour of continuous work she stopped to catch a breath. She gazed at her untidy handiwork, a tangle of sentences, some barely legible but the poem was complete. A new ghazal.

25 She might be an accidental courtesan but she was a willful poet.

26 Fakhrunnisa folded the paper bearing the ghazal and stood up. She went near the many stacks of books lying around the room and picked one up. Placing the ghazal inside the book, she forgot about it, until it dropped out, a little over twenty years later.

a number of politically subversive theatre and film productions, which included a minor role in the Jamil Dehlavi film, *The Blood of Hussain.* Ever the reliable dictator, the movie was banned by Zia-ul-Haq upon release in 1980 due to perceived criticism against the regime. Zeenat distracted herself by writing in abundance, sending a wide variety of nonfiction pieces to dailies like *The Star.* Her oblique and allusive critiques of the regime[27] and changing social mores often made it past the censors and gained a cult following in progressive circles.

In November 1984, Dilawar, who'd gone missing under mysterious circumstances a few months prior, was confirmed dead in Afghanistan during a skirmish with the Mujahideen. Zeenat was distraught. Before her brother disappeared, they had spoken of Zeenat's impending visit home and the possibility of her coming back to Balochistan. Marri didn't realise that her brother never took her suggestion seriously. As the ceasefire declared in 1977 by Zia-ul-Haq remained in effect and matters had settled down in the province, Dilawar had intended for the family to relocate to another country. He had a crushing sense of inquietude that matters were only going to get worse. He wasn't wrong.

In the aftermath of his death, Zeenat, sought comfort in spirit and couplets by inhaling the first and exhaling the second. Her first collection of free verse titled *The Piety of Your Prison Rings False* was critically acclaimed and promptly banned by government. Taking their cue from an avant-garde movement in Budapest based on the philosophical ethos of artist Zsigmond Kassak's *The Transgressive Impromptu,* Marri's inner circle learnt the poems and arranged a series of clandestine

27 An essay commenting on the state-sanctioned incineration of Parizade Sulayman's novel *Ifrit ki Tehreek* gained particular traction. Marri invoked the novel - concerning a band of disenfranchised Djinns railing against a totalitarian dictator - and used it as a Trojan horse to comment on the passage of Ordinance XX: legislation in keeping with the state's previous efforts to marginalise the Ahmaddiya community. This particular legislation prohibited and criminalized Ahmadis if they referred to themselves as Muslims or their places of worship as mosques. Marri comments:

"And may Allah continue to bless General Zia-ul-Haq for being a blinding source of light and truth in these dark times. Sulayman's book is a stain on the honour of this pure and virtuous country, as is her preposterous premise of insurgent djinns - for if djinns indeed exhibit such seditious behaviour, they will face the wrath of fire and brimstone when we use them to solve Pakistan's pressing energy conundrum. This solution has already been suggested by the great minds of Pakistan and given due consideration. Returning to the matter at hand, there is only one truth and were it not for the steadfast resilience of our Mard-e-Momin, falsehoods would proliferate and corrupt the minds of our populace like a poisonous fire. We should deal with imposters, heretics in the same manner: burn them till truth and light razes everything to the ground. Why wait for an afterlife when we can have hell on earth?

recitals at parlours, so her work could reach a larger audience. Those reciting were given free rein to embellish or subtract as they deemed fit and this often led to fascinating scenarios, with the audience expressing approval or disapproval depending on the quality and quantity of creative license undertaken.[28] Marri would make surprise appearances at some of the readings and by the time she'd published her second collection *Imperial Impudence and Serpentine Sardars,* her alcohol use had taken a turn for the worse.[29] She became known for slurring and staggering her way through public appearances and during one recital, overtaken by what can politely be dismissed as passion but was likely drink, Marri disrobed with economy of movement and chanted off-key:

"A chain bolt! A China bolt! A slain botch! Cabal shit on! Banal itch so! Banish act lo! Alas bitch no! Bail shat con! Obtain clash! Blah actions!"

Marri would've likely continued had a friend not seized the interval where she chose to take a swig from the bottle. She quickly wrapped Zeenat's naked body in a sheet and took her home as she kicked and screamed. The spirit-soaked striptease accompanied by the oddball chant went on to become a drunken tic for Marri and was sure to mar or uplift occasions, depending on the sensibilities of the audience. With time, people became accustomed to Marri's obstreperous public outings and had come to accept her drunken interventions as part of her larger artistic persona - "She is a poet. One must make allowances."[30]

But Marri's behaviour was facilitated and protected by a well-meaning circle of friends and acolytes alike, who although vexed by her corybantic behaviour, sought to make sure she

28 The ghazal reminded the courtesan of a time when she was young; a time when she was brimming with vitality that produced poetry with lax ease. This was when the courtesan not only had relevance but also the vigour of juvenescence to justify absurd dreams and lofty ambitions. Delusions of grandeur are attractive in the young, with their ruddy cheeks and boundless energy but such notions when advanced by the elderly are rightly regarded as alarming harbingers of caducity. Fakhrunnisa looked at the yellowing scrap of paper and understood the value of her life: fugacious, ruined. The unwritten ghazals, a reputation and respect that belonged to her and not some two-bit poet and above all the sense of a life fulfilled. The ghazal wept with the courtesan as tears fell on the page, making the ink bleed. Time lost, squandered, and yet ---

29 What can I do? How can I save others from a similar fate? She rummaged through her brain, cobwebbed as it was with disuse; stray thoughts rising only to be ensnared in strands of grime.

did not land into trouble with the authorities. Therefore, her drunkenness thrived and survived on the kindness of friends. Friends who retrieved her from an empty plot where she had fallen asleep during a wine-dark wandering; friends who paid exorbitant amounts to policemen after she'd dozed at the wheel of her car; friends who held her back and broke up fights after Zeenat's fulminations culminated in fists; friends who routinely checked her pulse and propped her to the side, exhibiting due diligence in making sure that Zeenat's autopsy did not bear the phrase "death by misadventure"; friends whose miracles while quotidian were no less important, when they replaced wine with water after Zeenat was past the bend; friends that cared.

Therefore, it was Zeenat's friends, who noticed a dramatic shift in her drunken behaviour.[31] Sitting at the house of Professor Anwar, a specialist in the field of Marxist literary criticism, a well-oiled but characteristically futile discussion was taking place on an essay concerning Hashtnagar; a region with a history of peasant revolt. A striking, young student, Laila, was in particular earnest, paraphrasing the thesis multiple times for her audience, who continually misunderstood, only to begin a fresh argument fuelled by increasing amounts of alcohol.

"You have to understand – it's always, always about the state – no-no-letmefinish – they always try to expre-no-I-mean repress any factors–actors that try to challenge their idiocy, I mean legitimacy, but really both. So you have to-"

Laila was unable to finish when the din in the room quietened, as they realised Zeenat was standing alone near the window, muttering words to herself.[32]

30 She searched for the right answer, the right words. Words. It had to be words. Words to protect women, sentences that would bind them to fidelity to themselves, couplets that caress their self-worth like no man or bottle could and poetry that offers salvation. Fakhrunnisa decided to gift future generations of women - and many would later expostulate against the courtesan's conception of a gift - her final ghazal. A ghazal that could save or ruin them, depending on whether they paid heed to the prophecy encapsulated in the couplets.

31 The courtesan birthed her final ghazal. It proved difficult at first to even form misras, muddled and middling as they were, products of a mind now inured to desuetude, but she felt something inside her, kicking and prodding, asking to be let out. She experienced agony, felt bloated, pregnant with a demon demanding freedom. Struggling with pen in hand, Fakhrunissa prayed for some divine flash of inspiration that would pave the way for all else, and suddenly

it came
the matla
teasing her
each behr

materializing in a tantalising fashion, appearing and disappearing with coyness familiar to the courtesan, the misra finally settled in her mind.

Fakhrunnisa wrote it down with feverish gratitude and other couplets followed dutifully, releasing in exhalatory bursts, her breathing grew ragged. Anyone watching would think she wrote with the urgency and vehemence of someone on the cusp of death: crying out from the effort each word extracted, writing as if someone would snatch the pen before she managed to finish. It was mid-afternoon and she willed her fingers on as light coruscated through the window, highlighting one word only to leap to the next, confusing Fakhrunnisa's tired and frantic mind into wondering whether nature was trying to tell her something useful or hoodwinking her into changing what was already perfect.

32 She got up to shut the curtains and had a look at the bustling marketplace beneath her apartment, not hating the hubbub for once and thinking it bore resemblance to the flurry in her brain. The courtesan walked to the desk, not seeing an empty bottle on the floor, tripped and fell to the ground, knowing instantly what lay ahead. Unable to get up, biding the next few minutes with stationary fury, Fakhrunnisa cursed her luck and the incomplete ghazal on the table. And as the minutes took on the interminable stretch of eternity and the courtesan, at the end of a life misspent, cursed and cursed, until she likely cursed the life out of her wizened frame.

Ali, a childhood friend of Zeenat's and an unfortunate witness to most if not all of her dramatics, approached her with trepidation, hoping she wouldn't hit him like she had the last time. "Zeenat, jaan, are you alright?" She did not respond but continued mumbling in an uncanny fashion. As he bent down to hear what she was saying, he was able to make out the following verse:

"I yearn for the womb, to rid my soul of rheum,
Pray pour three, so night blooms, oh kind Saqi!"

From then, Zeenat's inebriation was no longer disorderly but displayed signs of a quiet possession. It was always the same verse, repeated, for days on end. In the rare moments of sobriety, when asked about the import of the couplet, Zeenat would go white as a sheet, asking her friends to drop the matter and leave her be. She was unable to produce another book of verse and took to the bottle with the renewed enthusiasm of someone with a death-wish. She died of cirrhosis in January 1990.[33]

33 Her last exhalation, acrid and thick, rose up in the air, sinuous and serpentine, dancing and encircling her chair before settling above the paper bearing the ghazal. Fakhrunnisa - if this supernatural vapour was indeed the courtesan - began to float about in a rudderless fashion until the vapour formed a coil of smoke poised above the ghazal, before unraveling into different strands, zigging and zagging till the smoke levitated above the paper in a single stream and then without further ado, vanished! The curtain gave way, and light, once more, illuminated the dark sheen of words that formed the freshly etched ghazal.