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**Cross-cultural observations, personal displacement, and limbo:
a poetic study of an artist**

This study explores nostalgic memories of Lahore Pakistan and reimagines the heritage, social structure, streets, and markets from an artist's perspective. It also talks about the conglomeration of everyday social life in Lahore and Tallinn while discussing an abstract notion of living in a state of limbo in-between two societies.

MA thesis

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Introduction

My practice revolves around a network of technology, objects, and people. Through video and with a range of other mediums, I examine interrelated notions of function as well as historical and social structures where I live.

The thesis artwork talks about anthropology through video as a medium. It contemplates the social structure of two different societies (specifically Lahore and Tallinn) while trying to define a border in-between. It is a two-channel video; one part visualises the society in Lahore making interactions with a strange figure entirely covered in a green fitted dress, whereas the other part represents me as wearing the same suit with my hands and face being visible. The visually abstract videos represent a state of being and non-being which is defined as limbo.

In my thesis, I contemplate and compare the social structures of everyday life in Lahore and Tallinn. The first part of the thesis reimagines Lahore from its old town to modern-era streets and also discusses the social life of its people. The other part talks about my first interaction with Tallinn and how it sent me into a cultural shock. In this part, I am discussing society, social interactions, heritage, and language. This part also discusses the interaction with people I had while filming in the streets of Tallinn for my artworks and how I came to the visuals for my final project.

Background

This research contemplates displacement as a topic and observes society's social values in which we as humans are moulded. It also observes inter-connections between two societies and finds deep relations in people's characteristics despite their geographical context.

A question arises, are we humans interconnected and interrelated to one another even while living an individual life in various corners of the world? If we are, then what are the elements that connect us? Furthermore, what are the intermediate relations between people, their body language, culture, dresses, and history?

Each individual is believed to be nurtured from where they built a unique personality. That personality is formed gradually through various experiences that he or she has gone through. The collaboration of each individual having unlike experiences form societies, and similar societies give every individual various experience. This repetition is a general phenomenon that exists in every society because of its social and economic system. In every society, people spend their lives earning money, building houses, and raising families. From these people, some of them are connected with their religious beliefs, mystical approach, political views, and hold ideologies such as nationalism and social values. So the question I raise here is, are all of us unique in our existence? If we are, then how do we form a society that represents a unique identity?

I have lived in two societies where I have opened an observant eye for my art practice. One of them is Lahore where I was born and grew up as a child and the second is Tallinn, where I came for the sole purpose of my master's studies and to continue my art practice. However, since I started studying Fine Art in Tallinn, I began to reflect on the cultural aspects of Pakistani society from a distance. I started raising questions for myself about what it means to be a part of a society and how the society I was living in affected me through these years. Each question that was raised was used to make visuals. However, the purpose was to contemplate and build relations with my surroundings. This is the same practice I have been doing since arriving in Estonia where I am constantly observing and studying history, traditions, and culture. Even though both societies are completely different somehow, I am trying to compare some elements of Tallinn to Lahore such as traditions and social values.

Reimagining Lahore

Few cities in the Indian subcontinent can be said to have had a more chequered history than Lahore, a city ruled by Hindu kings, Mughal emperors, Sikh monarchs, and British sovereigns. There was something strikingly unusual about this golden land of dreams and legends. An embodiment of fabulous wealth and splendour, Lahore had captured the imagination of mighty men from far and near. For centuries, the city had attracted trade caravans, plundering hordes and conquerors in search of wealth. Scholars, historians, and travellers passing through the city were enchanted by its majesty and grandeur. In the heyday of its glory as the imperial capital of the Moghuls, a proverbial saying often heard was that Isfahan and Sheraz together would not equal half of Lahore.¹

Lahore is a city generally remembered for its historically rich tales of Mughal darbars, Sufi saints, and British rulers. It is more personally remembered to me through stories of my mother's childhood in one of the old town's neighbourhoods called Lahori gate and how the lifestyle of people expanded from the old town's walled city to the outer areas. It also reminds me of domes, minarets, streets, and markets where I spent a huge part of my life. I had a great chance to see the city once I joined Punjab University. The university was situated near the old Anarkali Bazaar, which became a daily path for me to cross. My breakfast was in one of the restaurants in the old bazaar that was always filled with people. Changes are quite limited over two decades when we talk about the walled city. Although the architecture is not fully intact, but the city's heritage is still an attraction for many people. The architecture in the walled city is based on bazaars and mohallas (residential quarters), with its narrow twisting gullies or kuchas (lanes and alleys) comprising the residential blocks. There are shops in the same residential areas that work with cloths, jewellery, grocery, footwear, embroidery, printing, etc. Even though the streets are too narrow to be used for vehicular traffic, these straggled honeycomb like lanes form a little world by itself and provide the residents a feeling of togetherness.² Residents living in tightly built houses share food with each other and are never hesitant even for asking for a small amount of sugar for instance. The relationship between each of these families is strong in a way that everyone is aware of each other's lives. People get together at each other's weddings where the event can

¹ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, p. 11

² Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, p. 20

go on for three to four days where a group of boys will do the bhangra for the groom (a traditional Punjabi dance), and the girls sing folk songs for the bride.

In past times, sentiments and news about the city were mostly discussed in the baithak (a private sitting-room) given by a prosperous person where some of the men would go to spend their time enjoying hookah and gossip. Others would join their friends in shops to give them a helping hand to deal with customers. They were always physically active in order to stay fit.³

There was a Punjabi saying by old people:

Chalda phirda lohya,

Baitha te gohya,

Laitya te moya

(Walking keeps a person strong like steel; sitting, he becomes a dung cake; lying-down, he is on his way to heaven).⁴

Women spend most of the time occupied in the thurrahs (patios) of their houses or the rooftop to sit in the sun during winters where they used to gossip while slicing vegetables. They are also busy buying products from cloth peddlers and street hawkers.⁵

I was born in Lahore to a middle-class family where my father used to work nine to five in a government job. I have mostly spent my life living around people who live in small houses either owned or rented. Having grown up in a religious household where most of the time politics was discussed, I was bound to see my career from the perspective where I could only be an engineer, doctor or join the army. In my childhood, Basant (kite flying) was the most awaited festival every year. The roofs of each house were filled with families flying kites, barbecuing and playing music. The visible yet subtle changes in the city occurred during that time. The city accepted modernity through its infrastructure and its people, who in their diverse cultures together formed a society from various social backgrounds.

³ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, pp. 21-22

⁴ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, p. 22

⁵ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, pp. 22-23

Society in Lahore now is a mixture of various traditions, social values, and ideologies. These ideologies and social values are formed through one's level of education. The society is divided into three parts. About 35 percent of Pakistan's population lived in urban areas in 2014. Where Lahore, which is the second largest city, was home to 2.2 percent of Pakistan's poor. 42 percent of Pakistan's population lies between the upper and middle classes, with 38 percent of it being middle-class families.⁶

Streetlife is male dominated where all the labourers, small business owners, and employees are men. People sell fruits, vegetables, snacks, etc on wooden carts and roam around in different streets and areas in their attempt to earn something good. Streetlife is crowded and noisy from traffic and with hawkers who sell their products. The markets are filled with people selling millions of products displayed in shops and storefronts. The bazaars are spread throughout Lahore from the modern towns to the culturally richer old city. Bargains are considered a necessity in buying any product in these markets.

First interaction with Tallinn

When the observational technique works, it puts you in the middle of the events and asks you to think through your own relationship to what you're seeing and hearing, which I think is more interesting for the viewer. The real film takes place where the mind or the eye of the viewer meets the screen and interprets, in a sense participates in, what they're seeing and hearing. - Frederick Wiseman, Cineaste interview with Cynthia Lucia (1994)⁷

⁶ Haq, Dr Ikramul. Bukhari, Huzaima. Widening rich-poor gap. - November 18, 2018
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/566702-widening-rich-poor-gap> (accessed March 23, 2022).

S. Akbar Zaidi, In Pakistan, it's middle class rising – February 28, 2017
<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/in-pakistan-its-middle-class-rising/article17378526.ece> (accessed March 23, 2022)

⁷ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life, pp. 41-42

I would use the term ‘Observational Cinema’⁸ here to define the capturing of the unexpected moments of society. Those moments that can relate to ethnographic studies, but were reconsidered to be represented within a conceptual framework.⁹

There are enormous amounts of differences and similarities in the streets that portray the characteristics and behaviour of people in which I am interested in filming. A lot of my research here consists of street videos with people doing routine activities. While filming, unintended consequences occupy people because the camera creates a weird relationship between me and the person being recorded. The relationship is quite important for me to have as the person might react in a unique manner through their body language while being in front of the camera. I would give here an example of the film *Primary* made in 1960 by Drew Associates. The film shows the political battle for the Democratic presidential nomination between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphery. The film was naturally shot, the camera was always on the move and chased both candidates in their scheduled interviews in the street, meeting halls, backrooms, and in campaign buses.¹⁰ What Robert Drew and his associates realised was that *Primary* was simply not just a camera taken off the tripod and chasing the character, rather it was free from a certain point by being in the hand of a skilled observer. The term ‘skilled observer’¹¹ is described by Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz.¹²

So what did a ‘skilled observer’ mean in this context? For Drew, the role of the observer was about witnessing. It involved being there when things happened. It was about following events, approached not as a series of statements about what was happening or had happened but as a process of unfolding relationships in which small clues like gestures, facial

⁸ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, p. 3

⁹ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, p. 4

¹⁰ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, pp. 28-29

¹¹ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, p. 29

¹² Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, p. 28

expressions, and body postures had revelatory potential. Above all, Drew and his associates were looking for what they called moments.¹³

Capturing spontaneous moments was what I was looking for at the beginning of my relationship with Tallinn. I was most of the time taking pictures of people while cycling around the city in the hope of getting an impulsive visual. This activity helped me build a relationship with the city and its people. The filming gets almost theatrical where I feel the person is directing me to film each of their movements. However, sometimes it gets too intense, and on some occasions, people came to talk about my intention and sometimes asked me to stop filming. People's reaction to me while filming pressures me to think of my ethical position as I am occupying their personal space. It is also tenses when you cannot speak the same language of the society. While being under pressure I had to make numerous decisions on the ground such as how to film, where to film, what equipment to use, when should I start filming and when should I stop.

I started my work in Tallinn while filming in the old town. I was interested in looking at people passing by in front of medieval walls that still show the signs of life in the past. One of the works created in the beginning was 'Wall projection on fabric'.

¹³ Grimshaw, Anna. Ravetz, Amanda. *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, p. 29



Still from **Wall projection on fabric/** Mixed Media installation - 2020¹⁴

The work was based on video documentation of a wall in the old city of Tallinn. Video was used as a projection and displayed on a thin fabric that has been blowing with the help of a fan. The wall together with the fabric breaks down the harmony and solidity of its material and transforms itself into a poetic sequence.

In another work, to engage with the city of Tallinn, I used video projections to get myself into a dialogue with the city, with its historic structures and traditional markets. I documented a video of the sea and used it as a projection in different locations in Tallinn. This is how I was able to create a visual pattern that connects me with the city and its residents.

¹⁴ Wall projection on fabric video, 2020 link <https://youtu.be/hInFE3UcZCI>



Still from **Sea projection in the city street/** Video projection installation - 2020¹⁵

People in Lahore get excited when they see the camera, and that's because they can only relate it to a news agency or the shooting of a television drama. Most of the time a large crowd gathers around the cameraman. People get interested in talking to the cameraman and about his project. Whereas people in Tallinn, busy with their routine, continue doing their daily activities. Sometimes I have been asked if I have any permission to film in the streets. A sense of privacy is disturbed wherever I filmed so rather than people focusing on the camera, I thought about the image of an unusual figure in the middle of them that catches their eye. So, instead of reacting to the camera, they notice the character. This is how I first planned to film a green character who stands right in the middle of the camera frame as well as in the midst of people. By doing unusual hand movements he successfully switched people's curiosity from camera to himself. An unusually fitted green suit that was slightly exposing the private parts of the person who was wearing it, triggered a reaction in the society that does not accept this appearance. This represents the idea of a being that is irrelevant in a certain society.

¹⁵ Sea projection in the city street video, 2020. link <https://youtu.be/SKtD8tl-N5o>

Defining social structures

Living between two societies, I have to define what the term social means and how it impacts me personally after being displaced from my hometown. ‘Social’¹⁶ are those experiences that we go through in our everyday life by interacting with individuals who play a significant or a small role in our lives. It is also about the relationships of people whom we interact with the most. This consists of wives, maids, children, people in the markets, cities, villages, workers, at home, outside of the house, and many more. These relationships function occasionally in different places such as trams, railway stations, markets, shops, streets, kitchens, etc. These kinds of social relations work as a collage to create a bigger picture of what society is.¹⁷ It divides us into functional groups of people with diverse beliefs and ideologies. There are also some major components that work in a society such as language, identity, food, caste, etc. All these social experiences influence individuals to form interactions with each other as a society that defines its own social structures.

Language is one of the main components in constructing social structures. It is the foundation of social life that helps develop other social components. As John Searle says ‘once you have a language you already have a social contract.’¹⁸ It is the first hurdle an individual experience while making contact outside of their hometown. Sometimes language differentiates from one city to another, but moving out of the country creates a big impact. The Estonian language is completely unique in its way and is not even close to Urdu. It is mostly difficult to make a contact while buying something in stores and gets even more difficult while making relations in social life. It becomes the most fundamental social institution on which all the other institutions depend. It is not only used to interact with people but also to think and to remember individuals. Language is a major part that supports social structure on its physical and non-physical entities.

¹⁶ Guru, Gopal. Sarukkai, Sundar. Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Chapter: 1, Section: The Everyday Social

¹⁷ Guru, Gopal. Sarukkai, Sundar. Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Chapter: 1, Section: The Everyday Social

¹⁸ Guru, Gopal. Sarukkai, Sundar. Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Chapter: 2, Section: Social ontology

Do social structures work only as a physical entity? It is not entirely the case. Societies work as a group of institutions both physical and non-physical. I will be discussing non-physical social structure by elaborating upon it more, using identity as an example. An individual's identity is an important element to define his/her personality. We know people by their names and the status they hold in society. Through identity, a person can be known in society even in their absence, and this absence becomes palpable in the society where the individual has spent a lot of their time. It is because the person has relatives in that specific society and they made relations with other individuals, and over time, people as well as the individual become an idea when the individual no longer exists with the same group of people. This is the idea I am having while being in a state of limbo. I am connected with the same group of people from my previous social circle through their identity.

Social gatherings for food are one of the elements that I can relate to when I think about Lahore. Food is one of the major aspects that creates an unmerged boundary between me and Tallinn. Even though there are tremendous restaurants in Tallinn that provide good local food, but as I am used to the food in Lahore this never gives me satisfaction while eating here. Also, the social gathering and food culture in Lahore is completely different than in Tallinn. There were some times when I, along with my friends, gathered at four in the morning to have breakfast in one of the famous cafes in old Lahore. Food creates big gatherings around the city and is considered to be the main attraction to be social.

Another element is related to the caste or clan system, especially in Lahore, which is systematically active in each individual. According to Lubna Suhail, it is the clan in which society is divided rather than the caste. 'There are numerous clans in Pakistan, essentially in the Punjab province -- the Rajputs, Jats, and Arains, to name a few. The clans represent a broader configuration of family units that share a common ancestry. They have rivalries, not

hatred.’¹⁹ Whereas, caste exists according to Jahangir Ahmad Satti, who writes in a reply to Lubna Suhail that ‘castes are based on the profession in the community’.²⁰

It is more of a socially conditioned phenomenon where people tend to think of their families and tribes first when they have to grow in business or get married. Even though it may not be something major to experience social structures in the city, if we start filtering people, we will find a group who are quite structured in this system. This component in the society is sometimes followed quite strictly in positive and negative manners in Lahore. Whereas it is a great reason to be a bond between the same group of people, it also can become a disturbing fact on certain occasions. However, this is something one cannot avoid while living in Lahore.

These social norms are an important element to help an individual gradually fit into society. By being born in one society and spending much of their time, an individual develops themselves according to these social values. It becomes a necessity to survive. One has to observe and apply on themselves the social values of the new society where they move in. It takes time for an individual to develop but during the observation period, the person physically exists somewhere else while he is still living in the same society where he comes from. Does this phenomenon apply to the people from Western countries who come to Tallinn? I guess not. This is something more related to the people coming from South Asia and the Middle East, as there is a big contrast between both of these societies. My idea is to describe the boundary line that exists between this contrast.

¹⁹ Suhail, Lubna. The New York Times “Pakistan Has Differences of Clans, Not Castes” – November 17, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/17/opinion/1-pakistan-has-differences-of-clans-not-castes-525290.html> (accessed March 17, 2022)

²⁰ Satti, Jahangir Ahmad. The New York Times “Pakistan Certainly Has a Caste System” December 8, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/08/opinion/1-pakistan-certainly-has-a-caste-system-224690.html> (accessed March 17, 2022)

What is limbo and how is it helping me to look at society from a different perspective?

This section deals with the state of shock I was in after leaving Pakistan and coming to a new place that is entirely different from my hometown. Observing a familiar society for the past twenty five years made me think of only one perspective until I saw a society with really different social norms. Estonia is a country with western cultural values and people here would be considered goras (whites: a term used in the Subcontinent for Britishers in the British Raj era) in Pakistan. What people eat, where they live, what names they have, and what they call their different neighbourhoods were some of the concerns that I had in the beginning. Also, unique facial features such as blond hair and blue eyes were elements that defined their visual identity to me.

The major differences that I find after coming from Lahore are the people and street life in Tallinn. The population as compared to Lahore is lower and the streets almost look empty to me. People seem calm with their daily life, yet are always busy with what they are doing. Even when the markets are crowded and busy they appear to be calm and less noisy than in Lahore. The weather is colder than what I experienced back in Lahore but the environment is clean and green because of the forests around the capital and in the country. Tallinn itself is well known for its well-preserved picturesque view of an old mediaeval town that lies adjacent to the modern era infrastructure with some architectural monuments related to the Soviet era. The city presents itself to be a cultural hub through its architecture and people.

Right after arriving here, what I absorbed made me think about myself as being in a state of mind where I could not mix my notions of society that came from my past experiences. The social experiences of my new and old home are a contrast to each other. However, my mind is always trying to merge both experiences into a single image even when it is not possible. It seems that the thoughts are left behind somewhere in Lahore whereas my physical existence is in Tallinn. It is kind of a state where I feel myself to be in the streets of Lahore while I am actually walking in Tallinn. I try to match each balcony in the old town in Tallinn to one of the jharokhas (balconies) that I see in the old town of Lahore. The markets remind me of the same crowd that used to surround me back in Lahore, where people walk in shalwar kameez

(traditional dress) with their children and used to roam around in the markets. The silence in Estonia makes me think about the calls of hawkers in the streets selling fruits and vegetables.

I started looking at society through myself. I have experienced a change in my personality after leaving Lahore. This change happened overtime going through various experiences from societies outside of Lahore. These experiences changed my consciousness entirely so the perspective of looking at individuals, ideas, and beliefs became from narrow to wider and I started accepting change through observation. I intend to follow the lifestyle of the society where I exist. This includes wearing similar clothes, speaking the same language, following local social activities, and the tempo of life. Every society has its own pace. The lifestyle in Lahore was fast, whereas I see tranquillity in Tallinn. This environment definitely changed my character towards calmness as well.

The most important of all these is my physical existence on the land I know little about. My existence here is not only about myself but how I exist because of other individuals. It is like a network of people connected through their social circles under one web. This social circle has many similarities with space as both are diffused and spread out; they cover a large area while having individual elements within them. Furthermore, space is considered to be an independent form, but as discussed in Leibniz's idea about space, it becomes constrained. Leibniz suggests that 'space has no independent existence of its own and can always be reduced to objects since what we call space is perhaps nothing more than the relation between objects.'²¹

This means, a space can never be a space without the idea of something material. If we look at a room full of furniture, we can divide it into positive and negative spaces. Some parts include table, chair, fan, glass, etc. Whereas, everything else where there is no material value would be called negative space as it would be filled with space at all. Now imagine something without walls and something with no ground as well. In parallel, space on the outer surface of the world does not exist if there are no planets.

Similarly, my state of limbo lies amidst the relation of social entities. It exists because of the parallel existence of individuals who create a social environment in my surroundings. It

²¹ Guru, Gopal. Sarukkai, Sundar. Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Chapter: 2

works as a bubble that progresses or regresses according to the nature of the social environment. Social change presses the bubble from its outer surface whereas the other part is the social transformation that works as an opposite force from the inner surface.²² Both social change and social transformation are suitable but should be moderately applied to oneself. Balancing both of these create a constant struggle of consciousness that dominates an individual for a while. This period of conscious struggle transforms certain qualities of an individual through adding or subtracting various norms.

Where this ‘conscious struggle’ contains the power to change an individual’s personality, I used it in my art practice. After producing a couple of works in Tallinn, I started looking into myself to see what I have taken from this city. This practice helped me make the work ‘Ashraful-Makhlookat (noblest of all creations)’. This work investigates and invokes many concerns, mainly about societies on multiple levels. The video referenced people from Lahore and Tallinn walking together on a black background. The basic idea was to merge both societies together. People from both countries, if we contemplate them visually, show differences between components such as clothes, face features, and race. These differences are enough to give an idea of where the specific figure in the video belongs. Two nationalities walking in the same frame in front of the black background represent the idea that these figures exist in a non-practical space. A kind of space that does not visualise perspective and neither does it show signs of gravity. Through this work, I tend to represent a form of limbo where being somewhere is similar to not being somewhere at the same time. It also talks about the idea of absence, which is as real as presence. For example, when we say Sufyan is not here or Sufyan was here. This sentence does not only describe my absence but also gives an idea of me being subtracted from a space. Similarly, the artwork visualises this idea by subtracting body figures from their original frame and pasting them onto a negative space.

²² Unit 12 Social change and transformation, p.165
<https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/65153/1/Unit-12.pdf>



Still from Ashraf- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations)/ Video projection installation - 2021



Still from Ashraf- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations)/ Video projection installation – 2021



Still from Ashraf- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations)/ Video projection installation – 2021



Still from Ashraf- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations)/ Video projection installation – 2021



Still from Ashraful- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations)/ Video projection installation - 2021²³

My idea of being in limbo is also about being open, in a state to learn something new and drop what is no longer needed. This process started after coming to Tallinn through many social factors that I experienced consciously or subconsciously in my everyday life. Such factors are social circumstances, social conditions, social media, social life, social rules, social movements, social action, social domination, and social influence.

These kinds of social experiences worked as a simulator where I explored myself through soulful interactions in my surroundings. But could it be possible to consciously skip all these observations in a society?

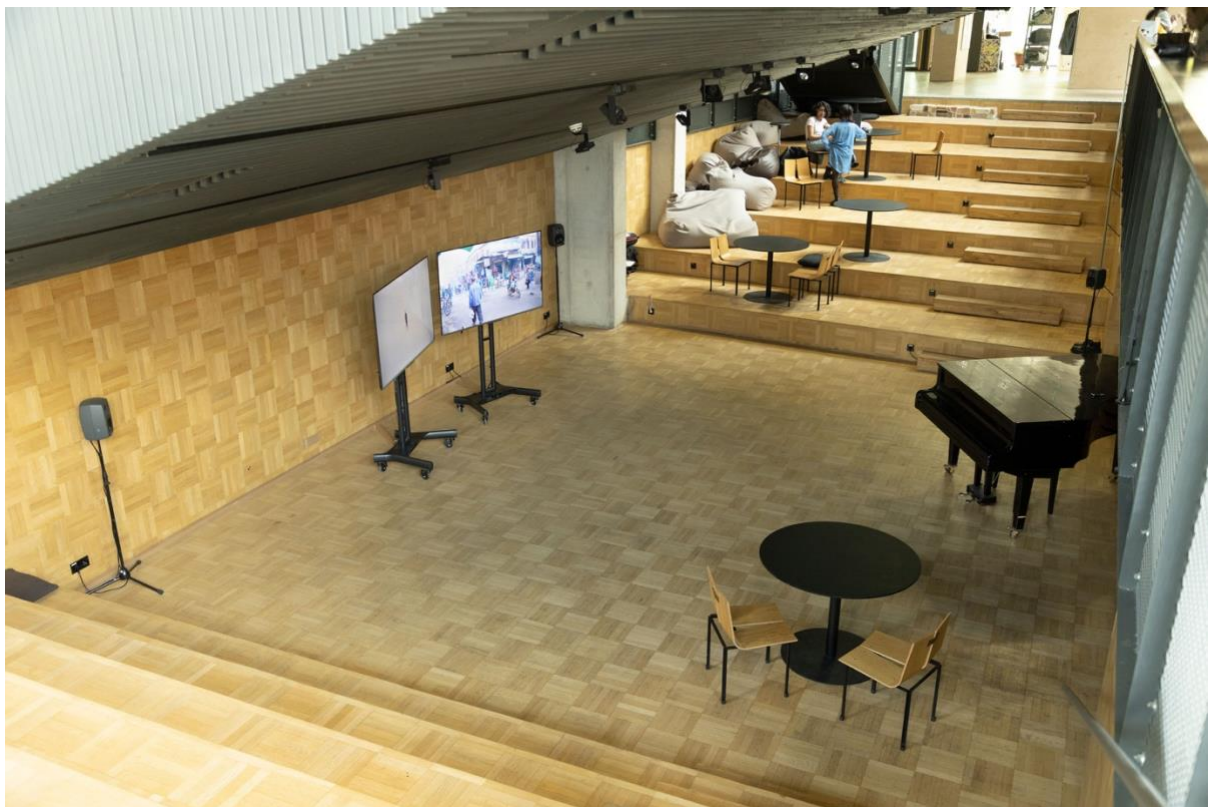
It might not be possible as these factors exist in societies all over the world. Moulded by society, they are a source to influence people who newly become a part of it. 'Every perception related to human individuals (in a world already suffused with the social) is an experience of the social as well as of the individual.'²⁴

²³ Ashraful- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations), 2021 video link <https://youtu.be/dn6PGW-PkYY>

²⁴ Guru, Gopal. Sarukkai, Sundar. Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. Chapter: 2, Section: Nature and Scope of the Social

Also, consciousness is considered to be a vital component of masses and is an integral side of sensation. Individual objects are cognized through consciousness and at the same time consciousness is merely better known through its awareness of objects. So this idea of limbo is autonomously activated in anyone who experiences displacement from their hometown environment.

Display



Conclusion

An unfamiliar environment for individuals who are displaced from their hometown can create anxiety and confusion. This phenomenon I have personally experienced after moving to Tallinn is called cultural shock. I am defining my response to this cultural shock by the word 'limbo'.

'Limbo is a situation in which you are not certain what to do next, cannot take action, etc., especially because you are waiting for someone else to make a decision.'²⁵

This definition of the term 'limbo' is objectively felt and taken sincerely. I use this term to describe a state of mind in which an individual consciously or unconsciously builds narratives according to their best social understanding. Those narratives can be built brick by brick by observing various social factors such as social circumstances, social conditions, social media, social influence, etc. The narrative that has been created by these factors slightly helps us define a boundary between two different societies. This boundary is where an individual exists after moving from one society to another, in my case, Lahore and Tallinn.

While in a constant struggle to build a narrative, boundaries work as a space of being and non-being. It is a space where an individual's existence works as a light whose source is positioned at a distance from where the light is being projected. To simplify, I will describe it as an individual who spent a big part of their life in a society where they made long-lasting social connections. That specific society lies deeper in the person's existence as an irremovable social entity even after moving to another society. In this case, social aspects such as language, identity, and the position an individual holds in the new society, try to overlap the social norms related to their hometown. This develops a constant struggle in that person to deal with both social components. However, this struggle becomes much easier when it is managed with a balanced attitude.

I struggled with the same idea after moving to Tallinn which changed my personality in a way, where I started accepting perspectives through various observations. This acceptance of

²⁵ Limbo definition https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/limbo

perspectives transformed my art practice by looking deeper into the topics I was mostly interested in, such as anthropology and ethnographic studies.

As now I have experienced displacement from my hometown society, I take limbo as a space of being and non-being. Its existence is supported by the material values that lie in this space. It is sometimes described as a negative space that is pure and flexible to the social entities in film composition, painting, or in a room. I position myself in a space parallel to the existence of masses.

Lastly, this state of limbo has raised more questions in my research regarding ethnographic studies, e.g. is it even possible to fully merge in a society other than one's hometown? If it is, then what aspects of society should an individual follow to do that? How are societies interconnected with each other in terms of the distance they share in between? As being influenced by the state of limbo, I will try to answer these questions through my art practice in the future and will explore this topic deeper.

Abstract

Muhammad Sufyan Baig

Cross-cultural observations, personal displacement, and limbo: a poetic study of an artist

‘In the heyday of its glory as the imperial capital of the Moghuls, a proverbial saying often heard was that Isfahan and Sheraz together would not equal half of Lahore.’²⁶

This saying probably describes Lahore as being an economic and cultural hub in the Sub-continent in previous times. Perhaps that is why the city was an attraction for conquerors in the region and beyond. However, my relationship with the city is more personal as I have spent around twenty-five years of my life growing up there. I know the city from its people, streets, heritage, and social environment.

Moving to Tallinn and trying to adjust to a completely different social environment with all those notions that I have developed in the past, create a constant struggle inside me. It is in normal words a cultural shock that I have been experiencing since being here, but in my thesis, I am describing it as a state of Limbo. This state of Limbo started after experiencing various social components such as language, food, culture, identity, the pace of life, etc. While being in this state, I am trying to find a boundary in between that can help to balance the slight change and abrupt transformation in my personality.²⁷

I have tried to explore various states of limbo in this thesis and also tried to find out the beginning of this state by observing the previous artworks that I have produced in Tallinn. Where the beginning of this state has been defined, I will wait for the end so that I can observe this phenomenon from a much bigger perspective.

²⁶ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, p. 11

²⁷ Unit 12 Social change and transformation, p.165
<https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/65153/1/Unit-12.pdf>

Kokkuvõte

Muhammad Sufyan Baig

Kultuuridevahelised vaatlused, isiklik nihestatus ja limbo: poeetiline kunstniku-uurimus

‘Mogulite impeeriumi kuldaegadel oli kombeks öelda, et Isfahan ja Shiraz kahepeale kokku ei võrduks isegi poole Lahorega.’²⁸

See ütlus tõenäoliselt kirjeldab Lahore'i kui olulist majanduslikku ja kultuurilist tuiksoont läinud aegade Indias. Võibolla sellepärast oli see linn ka nii kohalike kui kaugemalt pärit vallutajate jaoks atraktiivne sihtmärk. Ometigi on minu suhe selle linnaga palju isiklikum, kuna olen seal veetnud umbes kakskümmend viis aastat ja seal üles kasvanud. Ma tean selle linna inimesi, tänavaid, pärimust ja sotsiaalset atmosfääri.

Kui Tallinna kolisin, pidin harjuma täiesti erineva sotsiaalse keskkonnaga, olles pidevas segaduses. Teisisõnu on see minu jaoks kultuuriline šokk, mida ma oma magistritöös nimetan "limbo-olekuks". Sisenegin nimetatud olekusse, kui esmakordselt kogesin siinseid erinevaid sotsiaalseid komponente nagu keel, toit, kultuur, identiteet, elutempo jne. Selles olekus viibides üritan leida midagi tasakaalustavat, mis aitaks nende muutustega kohaneda.

Käesolevas magistritöös olen uurinud erinevaid limbo-olekuid ja proovinud määratleda sellesse olekusse sisenemise aega, analüüsides oma Tallinnas tehtud varasemaid teoseid. Kui olen suutnud sõnastada limbo-oleku algusaja, on minu eesmärk oodata, millal see lõpeb, et omakorda vaadelda nimetatud nähtust palju laiemast vaatenurgast.

²⁸ Nevile, Pran. Lahore: A Sentimental Journey, p. 11

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Video work links

Ashraful- Makhlookat.(noblest of all creations), 2021. video link <https://youtu.be/dn6PGW-PkYY>

Sea projection in the city street video, 2020. link <https://youtu.be/SKtD8tl-N5o>

Wall projection on fabric video, 2020. link <https://youtu.be/hInFE3UcZCI>