

the quilt book



anjana raza

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by anjana raza



SIMORGH
WOMEN'S RESOURCE AND PUBLICATION CENTRE.

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Introduction

In December 1993, Simorgh and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council organised a tribunal, "In The Court of Women." Participants from across Asia gathered in Lahore to publicly recount experiences of violence, and to discuss ways to collectively counter the many kinds of violence that women face.

One of the activities that came out of the tribunal was the quilt project. The idea of the Trinjan Quilt Project, for Pakistan, was drawn from a folk tale from Punjab - about village women who together had created a space of support, where they shared ideas and concerns, as well as work - weaving cloth, quilts and other items of household use. Threatened by the power in such a communion, the village men, one night, set fire and razed to the ground the house as well as the women who had gathered in it to work.

With Anjana Raza as the coordinator at Simorgh, the Trinjan Project was designed to serve as visual testimony to violence in the lives of Pakistani women. It was also conceived as an exercise in women's creative expression, a strength that alongside their body and person, has been kept cloistered by societal structures.

Over the span of a year, twenty-five panels have been created by various groups of women; of whom the youngest child was five years old and the eldest woman was in her seventies. The Quilt has travelled to schools, villages, poor urban settlements, affluent homes and a number of ngo meetings. Workshops would usually begin with discussions on what it means to be women, their rights or lack of them, daily domestic problems, poverty and the more blatant crimes of violence. Some of the stories shared were about rape of girls, mental and emotional abuse, prostitution of wives, stove and acid burning, economic deprivation and gross neglect. And though the priority given to concerns varied, it was found that no one was safe from violence. Talk would continue through the day, threaded in and out of the quilting process.

But 'the weave is loose today..' as Anjana Raza writes, and the silence that shelters violations, makes them acceptable, invisible, is complex and enduring. The project is complete, in view of its design. However, as an extension, Anjana's writings raise important questions about violation; as well as about the process of breaking silences and claiming one's self. It should be noted that the stories and all characters in the book are real, though the names have been altered in respect of privacy.

QUILT:

-to sew up between two layers

March 1995. Simorgh.

I reach beyond to gather the scattered bits of my being so I may attempt to sew them together, make a massive patch-work quilt and wrap it around my body.

Images and stories leap out at me from no where. Who do these voices belong to?

How long have they been whispering?

Women gather at the birth of a child, celebrating new life. Men walk in a procession, on their way to bury the dead. I feel rage well up inside and see my fists tighten, ready to sock a few. A cyclist passes by my window and he looks tired, forlorn. We are linked by a thread so fine, we keep losing it, misplacing it.

The project is over. Or may be, it has just begun. The Quilt panels are like old tapestries. Women woven into lives, lives woven into stories, into canvas, and canvas woven from rough yarn, linking us all...

Years later these tapestries will still sing of the lives woven into them.

A beautiful, sunny day and I find my self incapable of sitting in front of the computer, locked in one room. The garden, a patch-work of grass and vibrant flowers, reminds me of something, something old and familiar...

New England

...Tory tried to kill herself.

today she left. the room next door is empty.

they made her leave because she didn't want to carry their load.

a couple of nights ago I awoke to screams. screams of fright and pain. that night, shards of silence pierced my room. I knew - I knew she was going to go.

loud sobs kept floating into my room for a long time.

today I helped her pack and now the room is empty.

Tory left today. she tried to kill her self.

to think that you and I have tried to do the same - I mean, to kill our selves.

why?

today, I still think,

about Tory.

Tory tried to kill her self and they sent her away. her room is empty now. if you want to kill your self. will they also send you away? then your room will be empty too...

Aqeela

“An emptiness that has persisted for centuries, comes this way and spreads its wings wide. When the wings come to rest even the ground gives way. Nothing remains. But, when did *Nothing* get so heavy?”

Shehla

“Doors are always there for us to open. No corridor leads to a blank wall - never.
Late last night, when I sat down in the quiet of my room, there came a whisper from a far corner. ‘Come,’ it said and without a thought I followed. A corridor beyond, filled with dark shadows and bright sun light. Whose home? I inquired. ‘Yours,’ the whisper replied.”

Driving to Mariam's

Days, they swerve into nights. Nights, a residue of days. Endless hours of wakeful delirium and confused thoughts. A dreamer passes by, another one follows. No word, no sound, not a whisper. Sun pours its warmth into flesh and eyes squint, trying to focus on the distant plane.

Mariam tells a story

"she said she felt fine, as she slowly sipped her large tumbler of ice cold water, a crystal clear liquid that reflected her stark face. Fine, just fine. Only, don't say another word, don't ask another question, don't touch. For the world is falling and she is falling with it."

Mariam.

“The rain came today, beating down with glorious fury.

I wonder at my own writing, its worth and non-worth. Who do I write for - to what end? Will any one read these scraps, put them together, see the pictures take shape?

I detest words. They don't say what I want them to. And yet, it seems important to write.

As women, as people, we keep so much silence gathered around us - within us. So many secrets we carry to our graves. There is a limit to how much one can bear. Now, we must work to expose them, whisper them all out.”

Shehla.

“...Another night, I sat in front of many doors and pleaded for strength. One door, so large, dark and strong. I feared its magic within. Some one kept calling my name. But I dared not reach out, turn the knob and open.

My legs were caught in the whispering warnings of those unseen faces. They forbade me to seek entrance. Then threatened expulsion from their homes.

It is Love! I cried from the corner of my soul. “It is a heinous crime,” came their reply, reeking disgust.

I could smell their burnt emptiness. A stench greater than the molding corpses of those who extinguish them selves.”

“Now I walk past that door, turning my head low in shame and fear. They tell me to wait and not give up hope. They say soon love will sweep me off the ground.

But I know, their words have no meaning. Love was lost that night when I could not open its door.”

There are eight of us in the closed room. We have gathered to tell stories through the night. I listen attentively to Kulsoom Bibi, who sits across from me on a faded couch.

Kulsoom Bibi

“...I was just a child!

My parents lived in a world far removed. Their loud voices scared me, confused me. I don't remember my father too well. He was just a man, far away. My mother was always there...yet never here. She was too busy trying to be a wife and had little left over to be a mother. I simply kept out of their way.

I was known as the 'good girl.' Someone who knew how to keep her self busy and out of the way. When alone, out came the books and toys. I spent hours playing with my dolls. I loved my plastic children!

One day, someone came and said they would play with me. I was happy.

But I did not know. Even when it felt all wrong, I scolded myself and never said no. After all, adults knew every thing and children must be keen to learn. His games hurt, burned, they frightened me. Some part inside screamed, no, I am not woman yet. But I had no one to ask and so, kept silent. I - the new woman-child, withdrew, far away, inside.

Today, I am too old to be held as a child should be. Behind the curtains lingers a body and a pair of eyes that look, then shy away. My grand-daughter, she is another woman-child who waits to be turned into a mother.”

Tory

"...turn and twist. Fold it again. Again and again, till no space is left to turn around. Knot and close. Close and knot. More and more, till none is left to close within. A spot. A spec. Merely a thing...to pierce and pierce and then, pierce again..."

Mariam

"Shhh! Did you ever hear a silence that didn't scream? A silence that could be gotten rid of with out some struggle?"

Sakina

“How long - how long can one ignore? One day you will have to face the truth. Yes, one day you will have to face it. Till then I shall wait. For I am used to waiting patiently. This time I shall not come knocking at your door, begging for mercy, pleading guilty. For today, I am not guilty. Even yesterday I was not guilty.

Every time some thing went wrong, I heaved the guilt from your shoulders - laid it heavy on my own back. But not today. Today I shall not bludgeon my back with guilt!”

Simorgh

ANGER...and how the hell does one deal with it! Wait it out - draw it out - let it come through your arms, into your hand, into your pen, and out onto the paper. Let it out. Let it breathe. Let your anger create and heal itself, bleed onto canvas its saturated shapes.

Lahore 1994

To Amine:

I wrote a lengthy, seven page letter to you, but never mailed it. It is one of those letters that must be written, then calmly stashed away. One day I will open it and read it again. Got your card from Scotland, today. Yes, it is a beautiful land, filled with quiet, tumbling thoughts. I was there some ten years ago, around the same time of the year. And I remember... I remember how important it was to hold one's self back and simply watch. No, I don't grudge your not writing. Some times, one is caught, caught in a space of desire. A space where one greedily, consumed with hunger, reaches out to one self. The smallest movement, the lightest breath of wind, the shiver of a passing shadow, is enough to reduce one to tears. It is in those quiet moments of aloneness that one carries the soul and gives it over to the Divine. I am glad that you did not put pen to paper.

Simorgh Tribunal: In The Court Of Women, Lahore.

...the reason for being in this space was to plan concrete work - but so tired already! So much talk of violence. So many wounds surfacing all around. And simultaneously, so many beautiful people, their faces laughing, their eyes hurting, their touch nurturing.

So painful, consuming, utterly lonely. Feeling drained. Wanting to give and finding my self incapable of giving any more.

Hating my self for harboring limitations.

And to think that there is a week ahead of more work, more stories, more fatigue.

How will I do it? What will happen? Will the stories ever end?

Mariam tells a story

“He says you are sick in the head. Says you have grown up incomplete. By the way, I read in a magazine that black coffee causes breast cancer. Thought I’d let you know. You know you have a problem. What are you trying to prove? What is it that you are trying to prove? Haven’t I gone through enough? “I think you are sick in the head. By the way, I bought two saris for your trousseau. You want to see them?”

“The young woman listened silently.

She shook her head and smiled, apologetic.

Turn your back and walk out. No words to speak. No pleas to make. No stands to take. Just turn your back and walk out.”

Tory's note

"Lost in the folds of my ocean, I try to reach out...to you...to anyone. How miserable it is when one craves for company - company within one's solitude!"

Who am I?

They tell me things and I listen attentively. Then, I try to ignore, turn away. But when someone repeats the same thing again and again...it is difficult not to listen."

Shehla

“Four walls make the room I live in. Each one is broken by large, wooden doors. The wood shines bright and I turn my eyes away, trying to avoid the blinding glare. In a corner is my perch, a chair that holds me, lets me rest and offers its strength when my legs feel weak. The chair faces a solid, unbroken wall, no doors or windows to open.

The wall has been standing here for longer than I. It has seen the years drift by. The old gray wall recalls them all when we talk.

My wall, my child - we learn to co-exist when all those around us stand with hammers in their hands, screaming, ‘Break it down! Break the wall down!’”

Amine

“When the lights are out and a candle brings the dark to Life, I lie on my bed and watch - mesmerized.

A black-blue flame clings closely to the burnt wick, like a mother holding safe her first born child. Higher, above her darkness, dances the burning yellow, arms saturated with Life, reaching up, then falling low.

Cold wax and hot liquid turn to a shred of warmth. Waxen eyes turn to water. An outstretched finger feels the heat.

I watch the candle and her flame, knowing she will be gone before long, making way for another day, another night.”

Making lemonade

The ice shatters when it hits the water. The shattered sound echoes inside my head. I sip the ice cool liquid to ease the burning inside my belly.

At the first Quilt workshop Hanifa, who had been standing to one side, observing, wrapped her arms around her self and exclaimed, "women don't have the space to move! We are tied down - tied within. There just isn't any space left for a woman..."

She made a figure with brown bits of cloth. She made its hair with faded purple wool and braided it all the way down. Then looking up at us, she laughed.

On the flight from Lahore to Delhi

Today I shall leave the Quilt behind and travel to another land, another space. There I will work with a group of men and women on compiling a manual on child sexual abuse.

The images, the voices, the stories of women that I have seen and heard over these past months, accompany me. So far they are silent. But I fear they might suddenly erupt anew.

Bangalore.

The residue of yesterday lingers on like the stale smell of ash and squashed cigarettes. A grungy feeling. Some thing consciously forgotten, some thing knowingly left uncleaned. But today, in this early morning clean air, last night seems not to matter much. It is in the night time that the ghosts rise. Day light makes them invisible.

Thick air clogged with smoke, music and drinks. We could not breath. Gulps of air went in and were prematurely expelled with hysterical laughter. Till stars began to glimmer, till buzzing ears clouded the eyes, till the echoing laughs, punctured with memories, came to sit on our laps.

Who were we? What were we doing?

Bangalore.

A hot day, filled with dense trees and warm breeze. I sit in the office, the core of some women's organization. The drone of the fan echoes the hollowness within. I gaze out the locked window.

Working on the manual are nine individuals, each one with a different professional background, each one from a different city and I, from another country. We bring our selves and our experiences into a shared space. For long hours we sit and carefully explore one another's thread of thought and then, we weave these threads into yarn. Exercises, chapters, sections, all woven into a single document: the Training Manual on Child Sexual Abuse.

Suddenly I realize - the Quilt has not been left behind. The manual work interlocks the lives of nine individuals-the Quilt suggests the possibility of interlocking hundreds of lives. But its weave is loose today, and time is a culprit. The separate groups remain separate.

On our way to Delhi

The plane journey was by night. Stories I have been told over the years, all came rushing back to share my window seat.

A cruelty that killed the baby. A calm that crushed the bird.

There must be a reason for it. A reason for the way we keep falling, keep littering the floor.

There was, once upon a time, a castle made of nut shells. In the castle lived a lonely black beetle. The beetle had a very strong armor which it carried on its back at all times. It used the armour to defend itself from any one who might try to touch it, discover its softness, its vulnerability. The beetle was scared of getting hurt.

Unknown to the beetle, all those it kept away, were collecting just out side the castle. There they sat, waiting and rotting. Till one day, when the heat was so high that the locks shattered, they, who were waiting, melted into one massive puddle. The puddle rose in a vapor. The vapor spun around, frantic, and emerged as a giant. Crazed with the heat that had created it, the giant stormed around the castle and crushed the beetle under its heavy foot. The beetle's armor broke and the beetle's back broke. The black, lonely beetle died very quickly, for it had nothing left with which to hide its self.

Delhi.

Sitting here on Shrijata's balcony, a home in a foreign land, feeling the warm air glide off my skin, I gaze up at the sky. The moon, nearly a full moon, is the opal iris of some heaven's eye. It's cool gaze cajoles this land open, and I see...

All a question of right and wrong. Done or not done. I question all of it. There is a persistent longing within. A longing to tear open all walls, all doors, step beyond borders into the clear, boundless ocean. Each glistening drop in the ocean, an ocean in its self. Knowing happens.

Aqeela.

“I sense the journeying of the Spirit that claims this body. I close my eyes. Images form, transform, gather momentum and then, evaporate. Images of reality. The Spirit lives a hundred lives, a million years - growing, growing far beyond my mortal self. It petrifies me. Yet, I let it gather me and carry me through the ages, into a journey of many little excursions. And the end will be home for the soul. Tired but wiser, it will return to its Creator.

I am soothed by this image. The unrest of a million journeys becomes bearable.”

The City Linker Bus, from Lahore to Islamabad.

...the land, it is barren and dry. Yet not quite dead. Brown haze settles over the ground far away. The trees, they are dark and lanky. Their black, spindly limbs twist and curl, sway in the breeze, like old knotted bodies whispering evil words. The ground is bare. Just a shave of grass hints at the Life that once existed here. Now scorched, exhausted. Even the little saplings seem to be covered with the mask of death.

It is hot. I know, for it is the first of June. People walk along the road, slightly dazed, their eyes glazed over. I don't know if they seem blind because I am too far away or if it is the dust that has covered their eyes.

I am on my way to conduct more workshops for the Quilt project. The thought of colliding with more pain makes me cringe. Where does one put all the violence that is thrown into one's lap? How does one justify it, accept it?

"Get over it. Get beyond it!"

If I could make neat little packages of all the stories, tie a red ribbon around them and lock them away in a steel cabinet, I would not suffer so. But I never learnt to pack things securely. The wrapping always comes loose, disintegrates, leaving the truths raw for my soul to see.

The scene changes abruptly after the lunch stop. The flat terrain sharply converts into bulbous mounds of dried clay. As if some crazed giant came along and squished the land in his gargantuan hands. It is the beginning of the great mountains.

We slowly edge towards the foot hills of the Himalayas.

Knarled rocks jut out, layers of previous living, exposed to anxious eyes that sneak a glance, then flee away. Too scared to claim recognition.

01.37.am. Islamabad.

...damn this insomnia! I am exhausted! Have been lying in bed since midnight and can not sleep. I have to be up at 6 am. to go and conduct a workshop in Pindi but at this rate I'll go bananas very soon. Well, I give up!

... (just made my self a mug of coffee and now I write.)

Yesterday was the first day of the Quilt workshop at the school in Pindi. There were twenty-two girls, all between the ages of 10 and 15. And what a wonderful group it was. So much enthusiasm - so full of Life! I asked them what they thought **violence** meant and without hesitation they said, "the marriage of young girls. When girls are pulled out of school and married, it is violence. How can she be a house-wife, a mother and study? The husband wants her only to produce children. She must be allowed to study." Then they launched into sighting examples of their mothers and various aunts. And all this from ten and twelve year old girls!

They have made some beautiful, truth filled patches. I look forward to our discussion today and to joining the pieces into a panel. I was hesitant to do this workshop as I have been feeling very tired lately. But their energy has given me strength.

...What do I do? To just walk away from them seems so difficult.

Today we finish this workshop and tomorrow I conduct another one. I suspect I am becoming a work-a-holic.

To love strangers one has barely met, to step into the lives of those one has not even exchanged a word with. What do I do?

Slowly, slowly I learn to Live.

Amine.

“...the sun flower lifts its heavy head towards the sun, trying to catch every morsel of sunshine dropped its way. The moth, born into a death dance, tries to hold the candle flame till, suddenly consumed, it dies at the feet of its desire. Like sunflowers and moths, we too hunger for our visions...our goals...our union.”

Lahore

Zainab

*"Hush now! your voice rises too loud
and your face contorts with violence.
Come, sit with me today
we will play the same game."*

Burning words crawling all over me. The heavy August air forces the sweat to ooze out of every pore and run down in rivulets. On my way back from the workshop I can still hear Zulekha...

*"...no, not angry. You can not make me angry.
They did nothing and so, created silence. Then they gave it to me to keep. I keep it safe, feeding it. Hate? It is not mine by choice. It simply clings to the silence within. They follow me around every where. And I detest their presence...but I have no strength left. Only borrowed numbness.*

Why?

Are you here to tell me?

Tell me why it happens?

Be careful! Your rationalizing won't make it go away. It will keep coming back, with words we both must hear every day."

Soon, soon I will take a long cold shower. Wash off all the heat and grime. I will sleep an agitated sleep invoked by the tepid fan air. And yet I know. The burning will not leave me in peace.

Packing a suitcase

*...it comes in waves. It comes like whip lashes. It comes to awaken the body from a long slumber. Like the claws of a kitten - sharp, uncontrolled, it rends the flesh and sinks into the bone. There, settled deep, it punctures into the marrow. Bone marrow - so brittle, so soft!
The bone, the metal shell of a bomb, explodes. Marrow bleeds. Salty sap of life - spilt, useless.
And then the pain begins. Like rust, it corrodes in to the back bone. It splashes across nerves and clutches the muscles tight. It laughs, leaving destruction in its wake. The body tenses, trying for control. But a storm must have its way. The carcass of bones smashes against its fleshy casket. The body quivers, it twitches, it is washed over by a hundred spasms. Slowly, the mind loses its footing. It sinks to the bottom of insanity. There it lies, vacant and dyeing.
Tomorrow - tomorrow it will be o.k. Tomorrow the cat will draw back its claws. Tomorrow the pain will vacate this body. Lungs will fill with air again, that life giving, life saving air. Just bear the pain for now. Tomorrow it will be o.k.*

Lahore

We laughed and then we grew silent. In the silence, crusted scales were gently peeled away. Image after image. All of them after-images of memory. It was a world within - coming out to meet me. Or was I going in?

Souls met, far away from the usual day. There was nothing left for us to fear. Some one sat in a corner to weep. Some one walked by in silence. Another spread out its arms and said: come...here I am. Here I stand alone.

Then...

Inside our own shells, we moved on.

Aqeela

Spaces...they are beginning to merge. Spaces that have been kept separate for so long, now form their own links.

Peeling vegetables.

The sea of creative energy, like the high tide, comes in quickly, by surprise. It entangles the soul in its folds. And, as quickly as it comes, it ebbs away, leaving the soul to shiver. I wait, patiently.

Life is fluid. It is creativity. Not to be held, never to be boxed nor molded into a singular form.

Peshawar

There is a beauty in silence...I discover it anew these days. In a village for ten days. Away from the noisy urban life. Away from the streets cluttered with stale bodies, soot covered buildings and chaotic metal sounds, I am a by stander here. It is quiet. Just the birds and a few stray dogs - no people. Thank God.

I drift towards my self, an opening up of intense clarity The space is vast, uncluttered. All other is left out side. A rush of blood, pounding Life within - it brings us closer today. I lock my self into you, your subtle curves, your vast planes. Then, surprised at my own boldness, I shy away. Some one calls my name. The moment shatters. I know, I will always hold you - in memory, an after-image of our acceptance.

Simorgh

Stories - and where do they come from? Who creates all these stories?

There they are, taking root in childhood bed time tales, stretching over years.

“Hush! that’s a family matter...

...Don’t question. It’s written in the book...

...Keep it to your self. Its private!

...What will others think?

...once upon a time...”

The fear of authority, the fear of consequences, they help to create our little stories that are quickly hidden by the night.

Soon we are isolated, each in our tiny silence dipped shells. To keep our shells from shattering, we silence others.

Lahore

I don't shed tears for that which is kept invisible.
How easy it was to sit amongst others, listen to their stories
and hold their hand when they wept. How simple it was to say,
*"oh I am exhausted after conducting workshops and listening
to painful stories. I feel overwhelmed and so weep."* But now,
there is no Quilt, there is no Manual. No excuses remain.
I write for no one. Not even my self. I write to try and fill an
ever growing void within. There are no structures, no frame
work for this society to exist in.
Tonight I lie on my bed and feel my body breaking. Tonight I
fear apathy crawling into me, sucking my soul dry. I could
simply walk out of this place, buy a ticket and leave town,
leave this country behind. Instead I do nothing. Simply lie on
my bed and think of Tory.

June 1995. Simorgh.

I call to Tory and hear her laugh. I look for Amine and see her dark eyes, caves of many lives stitched together.

I call to all those I have shared with and who have shared with me, and settle calmly in their embrace.

I gather the bits of stories I have heard and attempt to patch them together, make a massive patch-work quilt and spread it before all of us to see.



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