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An Ecological *Shahr Ashob*: Literature, Multispecies Loss, and Lahore's Environment
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ABSTRACT

*This article argues that South Asian, and particularly Pakistani, vernacular literature constitutes an underused archive for writing the environmental history of Lahore and the wider Punjab. Reading across the marsiya tradition, Qur'anic and Hindu conceptions of the non-human animal, Saadat Hasan Manto's short fiction, Intizar Hussain's novels and essays, and Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*, the paper traces how the retreat of animals from Lahore's urban core horses and cattle displaced by municipal ordinance, vultures lost to ecological collapse, songbirds silenced by concrete registers in literary texts as a record of transformation that municipal and state archives do not preserve. Working within postcolonial ecocriticism, and following Ayesha Jalal's model of literature as historical source alongside David Gilmartin's and Richard Eaton's arguments about the ecological foundations of religious and national identity in the subcontinent, the paper proposes an ecological *shahr ashob*: a lament in which the fallen order is a multispecies civic arrangement rather than a dynasty. It argues that Lahore's animals have not simply declined but have been serially reorganised, and that literature is the only archive registering the reorganisation rather than merely the loss.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Lahore, Urdu Literature, Animal Studies, Environmental History, Partition, *Shahr Ashob*, Intizar Hussain, Bapsi Sidhwa

Yeh ik ishara hai aafaat-e-nagahani ka

Kisi jagha say parindon ka kooch kar jana

"It is a sign of unforeseen calamities/ When birds decamp from a place"

— **Alam Taab Tishna (1985)**

Introduction: Literature as Environmental Archive

The model for this paper is the narrative history practiced by Ayesha Jalal in *The Pity of Partition*, her study of Saadat Hasan Manto's life and writing (Jalal, 2013). Jalal's method does not observe Lawrence Stone's sharp distinction between fictional narrative and historical narrative, and neither does this paper. Literature, in the argument that follows, is treated as a source of history in its own right, with its own archival value, and literary texts are read as necessary context for understanding environmental change rather than as ornamental illustration of it.

To say this is to make a claim about evidence, not about interpretation. Stone's (1979) distinction between the historian's narrative and the novelist's rests on the warrant of the sentence: the historian's narrative is answerable to a document; the novelist's is not. Jalal's practice suspends that distinction, not by treating Manto's fiction as reportage, but by recognising that certain changes leave no documentary residue and are recoverable only

where someone happened to notice them. Ecological change in a colonial and postcolonial city is of this kind: no municipal record was kept of when a lion ceased to be audible across a neighbourhood, or of how many vultures a city's dead could become fodder for. The claim organising what follows is therefore not that Lahore's animals have declined that is a matter of record where records exist but that the ritual, economic, and affective relations binding them to human life have been serially reorganised, and that literature is a significant archive registering the reorganisation rather than merely the loss.

Ecocritical frameworks have begun to be applied to Pakistani anglophone writing most substantially by Rahman (2019), whose account of place in Pakistani women's literary and cinematic fictions established the field's viability but the relationship between humans and non-human animals remains largely unexplored in Pakistani literary studies, and the vernacular archive almost entirely so, even as climate scholarship and environmental litigation have sharpened the concerns of contemporary writers. This paper does not attempt a survey of either field. It maps a set of literary and historical instances in which the animal figure records ecological change in and around Lahore, and argues that these instances, read together, constitute an archive.

The argument begins, admittedly, in memory rather than in the archive. The lead author of this study grew up roughly five kilometres from the Lahore Zoo and recalls hearing its lion roar in the early mornings of childhood. At some point the roar could no longer be heard over the cacophony of cars, buses, and people. He recalls early morning walks in what was once called Lawrence Gardens, his father pointing out bats hanging from the trees, and vultures visible in the open spaces of the city. With time, as open spaces were built over, the vultures disappeared. The vulture's disappearance is not merely a loss of biodiversity but a disruption of a scavenging function that once limited the spread of disease (Oaks et al., 2004). The Indus turtle, similarly, once removed toxic material from the Indus River, and its extinction has been linked to the spread of water-borne disease among riparian populations (Akbar et al., 2006; Safi & Khan, 2014). Add to this the controversial debate over the zoonotic origins of Covid-19, in which bats figure as a probable reservoir (Andersen et al., 2020), and the international controversy over the elephant Kaavan's treatment in a Pakistani zoo resolved only after the singer Cher intervened to arrange his relocation (Maron, 2020) and the stakes of locating the animal in relation to the human come into focus. The question is not really about the human urge to conquer and extract, but about the recognition that the animal world sustains an ecological balance on which human life depends. What Rozzi (2012) calls "biocultural homogenization" the mutual erosion of biological and cultural diversity, in which the homogenisation of habits and habitats drives each other names the process at a planetary scale; environmental historiography's turn toward recovering the non-human from within the Anthropocene makes the literary record of the animal increasingly important to examine at a local one.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Vernacular Archive

This paper works within postcolonial ecocriticism as inaugurated by Huggan and Tiffin (2010). Their central objection to mainstream Anglo-American ecocriticism concerns its founding spatial assumption. The wilderness-and-preservation model organising much of that tradition presumes a human world and a natural world separated in space, such that the ethical task is to protect the second from encroachment by the first. Colonial and postcolonial societies were not organised around that separation, and in South Asia the settlement in question long predates any conservation ethic. The animals in this paper are urban animals: kept in courtyards as pets, pulling carriages, and tolerated and fed in the streets as scavengers. Their

disappearance is not the retreat of a wilderness before a city. It is a rearrangement of the interior of the city itself, and the vocabulary of wilderness cannot register it.

Huggan and Tiffin's corpus is largely anglophone African, Caribbean, and settler-colonial. Nixon's (2011) account of slow violence is situated in the Niger Delta, from the American environmental justice movement, and from South Asia chiefly through anglophone writing on large dams. Pakistani material appears rarely, and Urdu and Punjabi vernacular material almost not at all. This is the gap the present study addresses, and it is not merely a gap in coverage. A field which reads anglophone postcolonial writing does not ask what happens when the archive is in a language the field does not read, and in genres the *marsiya*, the *shahr ashob* for which it has no equivalent.

Reading that archive requires bending the framework, and this is where Jalal's (2013) methodology is most relevant. The paper first performs ecocritical close reading, attending to the animal figure in a literary text as a figure like any other. Then the paper performs a historiographical analysis by treating the same figure as evidence, in Jalal's sense, for a material change. The two do not always agree. Sidhwa's vultures, as the closing reading of *The Crow Eaters* argues, are at once a comic device, a theological instrument, and a datum about the carrying capacity of a colonial city's Parsi population. However, this paper does not choose between these positions for its historiographical reading.

The *shahr ashob*, the Urdu genre of lament for a fallen city, supplies what no Anglo-American ecocritical vocabulary does: an established poetic form whose method is the enumeration of what a city has lost, developed across two centuries by writers for whom civic collapse was the ordinary subject of poetry (Pritchett, 1984). The ecological reading of this genre lends rich dividends, as shown in this paper.

Environmental History and the Making of Pakistan

David Gilmartin extends an argument made by Richard Eaton about the conversion of Bengal to Islam under Mughal rule that this religious transformation occurred simultaneously with an ecological one (Eaton, 1993). Gilmartin (2011) argues that a parallel process occurred in colonial Punjab, where the ecological changes wrought by British irrigation policy were instrumental to the very creation of Pakistan. This is consistent with the well-established understanding of canal colonies as foundational to the formation of Punjabi identity under colonial rule. For Gilmartin, the transition from a pastoral and semi-pastoral Punjab at the start of British rule to a fully agricultural and settled Punjab by its end strengthened the *baradari* (kinship-lineage) system. *Blood and Water* (Gilmartin, 2015) traces the Indus basin's transformation from an arid pastoral watershed into the most heavily irrigated river system in the world, and insists that this transformation was not the backdrop to the making of communities and nations in Punjab but the medium of it.

The kinship claim is worth pausing on, because it is where the argument becomes most useful here. Irrigation did not merely water the land of Punjab; it required that land be allotted, and allotment required that the state identify units to which allotment could be made. With the establishment of the canal colonies, the *baradari* system hardened into an administrative category because the colonial property order needed one. Ecological transformation and social transformation are thus one process viewed from two positions. The colonial revenue authorities looked at unproductive land as a site available for improvement (Gilmartin, 2003b). Thus, land appearing as "waste" could be reordered to perform different functions. The readings that follow in this paper will find the idea of "waste" doing very different work in literary texts. We raise these claims provisionally, as ones better adjudicated by historians of colonial Punjab than by literary critics; but they establish, at the level of policy and land,

the pattern of ecological transformation this paper traces at the level of literary representation.

Religious and Literary Genealogies of the Animal in South Asia

Two parallel genealogies frame this inquiry. The first is the *marsiya*, the elegiac narrative poem mourning the tragedy of Karbala, a tradition strong across many cultures but especially pronounced in Muslim South Asia. Within the *marsiya* tradition, the horse of Hussain, Zuljanah, has become an integral figure an extension, almost, of its rider's body. This is even more pronounced in the culture of the *majlis* and *zikir* (an act of remembrance), where the *zakhir* devotes considerable time to praising Zuljanah's bravery and loyalty to the Imam. Meanwhile, in South Asian Hindu tradition, the cow is held sacred, and the recent revival of *gau raksha*, or cow-protection vigilantism, reasserts a particular understanding of that non-human animal's status. The presence of elephant-headed Ganesha within the pantheon further indicates a South Asian willingness to elevate the animal to divinity.

There is also the literary case of *Mantiq-ut-Tair*, or *The Conference of the Birds*, the twelfth-century Persian poem by Farid ud-Din Attar (Attar, ca. 1177/1984), reworked in post-Partition Pakistan by Bano Qudsia in the novel *Raja Gidh*, or *King Vulture* (Qudsia, 1981). Attar's title is drawn directly from the Qur'anic account of Solomon (27:16), who is taught the language of the birds so that he may discover the secrets of their world a story that likewise stresses communion between human and animal. Sarra Tlili's *Animals in the Qur'an* argues that the Qur'an accords a marked respect to animals, or "non-human animals," as she designates them (Tlili, 2012).

Qudsia's title does more than invert Attar's. Where the *simurgh* is a destination the thirty birds discover to be themselves, the vulture of *Raja Gidh* is a condition that spreads. The novel's governing conceit is that unlawfully acquired sustenance *haram rizq* corrupts the inheritance of those who consume it, as carrion is held to have corrupted the vulture, and the corruption passes down. The bird is not a symbol placed beside the human story; it is the mechanism by which the novel explains social decay, and its logic is transmissible and quasi-biological rather than emblematic.

Shahr Ashob and the Ecological Elegy

The genre of *shahr ashob*, literally the city-disturber, entered Urdu from Persian and Turkish antecedents in which the disturbance was erotic rather than political: the *shahr-angez* was a desirable youth or artisan whose presence agitated a city's inhabitants, and the poem cataloguing him became, incidentally, a register of the trades and quarters he unsettled (Sharma, 2004). The genre's reversal in eighteenth-century North India is well documented. After 1707, with increasing force after 1739 and again after 1857, the city-disturber ceased to be a beloved and became a condition: the collapse of patronage, the ruin of quarters, the dispersal of populations. What had been an ornamental inventory of urban life became, as Pritchett (1984) puts it, a world turned upside down an inventory of urban loss (see also Naim, 1984).

The *shahr ashob* does not lament in the abstract; it enumerates. It names the trades gone, the households dispersed, the streets in which particular absences are felt. Nazir Akbarabadi's carnival of a ruined world proceeds by catalogue, profession by profession, and the catalogue is the grief (Pritchett & Faruqi, 1984). This is why the genre has been treated as primary historical information rather than sentiment: it supplements the court record with the same collapse registered from below (Petievich, 1990; Tignol, 2017). The *shahr ashob* is a counter-inventory. Where the colonial gazetteer counts a landscape to establish what it might yield, the *shahr ashob* counts it to establish what it no longer holds. The two forms share a

documentary impulse and differ entirely over what may be entered in the ledger as a loss. Thus, read through Gilmartin's environmental history lens, the *shahr ashob* is the literary form that registered, in the idiom available to it, the reordering by waste and improvement traced above through canal acts and settlement reports. The political order those poets mourned was also an ecological one, and their poems, in mourning the first, preserved the second.

This paper therefore proposes an ecological *shahr ashob*: a lament in which the fallen order is not a dynasty or a court culture but a multispecies civic arrangement. The couplet with which the paper opens are already one, compressed into two lines, and every term in it is doing ecological work that the standard translation flattens. *Kooch kar jana* is not "flying away." *Kooch* is the striking of camp the vocabulary of caravans and armies breaking ground and moving on and in its idiomatic use, *kooch kar gaye*, it is the Urdu euphemism for dying. In a Punjabi register it shades further, toward *hijrat*, the migration that in this region carries only one referent. The birds of the couplet do not flee. They *decamp*, with everything that word carries about populations in organised motion. The departure of a species and the displacement of a population are, in Tishna's vocabulary, the same event.

Ishara repays equal attention. It is not *shugun* or *faal* not omen, not augury, neither of which the couplet uses. An *ishara* is a hint, a gesture, an indication made obliquely and requiring interpretation. The birds do not prophesy. They gesture, and someone must be attending closely enough to read them. This is precisely the epistemological position the paper claims for literature: the ecological record is not absent from the archive so much as written in a register the state has no procedure for reading. And *aafaat-e-nagahani* calamities sudden and unforeseen have not yet arrived. The disaster the birds indicate lies ahead of the verse itself.

This last point is significant in understanding the genre. The classical *shahr ashob* is retrospective: it is written after Nadir Shah, after the annexation of Awadh, after 1857, and its purpose is to record a city after its ruining has been completed. In contrast, Tishna's couplet grieves forward. Its birds register a calamity that has not happened, and their departure is the only instrument by which the calamity can be known in advance. An ecological *shahr ashob* is proleptic where its ancestor was elegiac, and this is a consequence of its object rather than a literary refinement. The vulture's disappearance and the songbird's silence are not the disaster but its early indication, and what they indicate a scavenging function that has been made redundant, a sanitary regime rendered a failure, a zoonosis lies largely ahead of the reader. As the reading of Sidhwa below shows, her comic novel is organised around the same proleptic principle.

It is also important to remember that the *shahr ashob*, being an elegy, does not express anger. The tradition's classical register includes reproach and satire alongside grief, and its poets do not only mourn the ruined city, they identify who ruined it (Naim, 1984; Pritchett & Faruqi, 1984). An ecological *shahr ashob* inherits both registers. The grief is for the lion, the vulture, and the *shaama*; the anger is at the ordinances, developments, and pharmacological regimes that removed them, and at a state that treated their removal as costless because it possessed no mechanism for measuring a cost. Literature supplies the instrument. The ecology this paper describes is angry, then, not because nature retaliates, though in the vulture's case it demonstrably does, but because the archive recording nature's subtraction is written in a genre that has always known how to apportion blame.

Manto's "Naya Qanoon" and the Politics of the Tonga

Saadat Hasan Manto's 1938 short story "Naya Qanoon" ("The New Constitution") centers on Ustad Mangu, a *tongawala* who misinterprets political discussion of the Government of India

Act of 1935 as a guarantee of complete freedom from British rule (Manto, 1938/1987). The story is also, we suggest, a potent representative of the strand of Urdu literature that articulated anti-colonial concern a point worth raising against Aijaz Ahmad's response to Fredric Jameson's claim that all "third-world" literature is inherently national allegory and resistance literature (Jameson, 1986). Ahmad (1987), arguing against a supposedly characteristic trait of third-world writing, contended that Urdu literature possessed no sustained anti-colonial credentials. "Naya Qanoon" complicates that claim.

The animal represents more in the story than criticism has generally assessed. Mangu's political education takes place on the box of his *tonga*. It is where he overhears the passengers two Marwari businessmen whose fragments of talk about the coming constitution he assembles into his conviction that British rule is ending, and it is the source of the authority he then exercises among his fellow drivers at the *adda* (Manto, 1938/1987). The vehicle is his access to the political, and it is equally the reason that access is partial: he hears one side of conversations conducted behind him, in motion, by people who do not know he is listening. The *tonga* is an eavesdropping machine, and the horse is what makes it one an engine slow enough and quiet enough for talk to carry forward to the driver's seat.

The story's irony therefore does not rest solely on Mangu's misreading of the discussion about the new law. Manto has already established the *tonga* as the object of its owner's aspiration, ornamented with brass and gilt fittings bought at a cost disproportionate to his earnings, and it is from this vehicle that Mangu greets a new order which, when he tests it on an English passenger, delivers him to a police cell (Manto, 1938/1987). The reader arriving later knows something further: that the order which did eventually arrive removed his horse from the city altogether. What the story cannot see, and what this paper can, is that the *tonga* was never a neutral setting for anti-colonial hope. It was itself among the things the postcolonial city would legislate away.

The horse-drawn carriage was, before the popularisation of motor vehicles, an important and status-bearing mode of transport in Lahore; owning a horse and carriage signalled social standing. In the late 1990s, under Metropolitan Corporation Lahore municipal directives and local government environmental initiatives, the *tonga* was banned within city limits and gradually replaced by the *qingqi*, a motorcycle fitted with a rear bench that can carry eight to ten passengers (Anwar, 2014).

Intizar Hussain's Zoological Imagination

Among writers who wrote in and about Lahore, Intizar Hussain stands out. Critics such as Nasir Abbas Nayyar have applied an ecocritical framework to his work, arguing that Hussain draws many of his metaphors from the botanical world (Nayyar, 2017). What has been comparatively neglected, in our view, is Hussain's relationship to the zoological world. *Basti* (I. Hussain, 1979/2007), perhaps his best-known novel, employs the metaphor of a plague spread by rats to figure the chaos and death surrounding the 1947 Partition: the protagonist's mother is horrified, early in the narrative, by the growing number of rats in her home. Later, juxtaposed against this malevolence, the protagonist searches for a *shaama*, a songbird often caught and caged, and mourns its absence from Lahore's ecology a loss that carries, for him, the further loss of a metaphor of song and freedom in postcolonial Pakistan.

The two creatures are not merely juxtaposed; they divide the novel's ecology between them. The rats arrive in numbers, indoors, uninvited, and they arrive carrying history: their multiplication is the form Partition takes in the narrative before Partition is named. The *shaama* is singular, sought, and absent (I. Hussain, 1979/2007). Between the absence of the

songbird and the arrival of the rodents, *Basti* maps a displacement in which the loss is not offset by the arrival but compounded by it.

The echo of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is worth noting here, and worth stating precisely, because the comparison holds and then breaks. Both writers take the caged songbird as their figure, and both understand the cage as the condition of the song; Angelou (1969) gives the human practice of caging songbirds for pleasure a direct connotation of human bondage. But Angelou's bird sings because it is caged, and captivity is the book's subject. Hussain's *shaama* is not in a cage at all in the novel: it is missing from the city, and what has gone with it is the availability of the cage as a metaphor. Angelou writes from inside a figure of captivity; Hussain writes from after one. In his newspaper columns and occasional prose, Hussain returned to the birds that visited his garden to feed on breadcrumbs he scattered, and lamented how their numbers dwindled as the city expanded and concrete structures replaced open ground.

The Animal Figure in Literature: A Comparative Frame

The animal figure recurs across literary traditions in ways that can sharpen a reading of its Pakistani instances, and the canon of such figures is by now well surveyed from Keats's nightingale and Poe's raven through Eliot's cats to the exoticised tiger of colonial hunting narratives and Orwell's allegorical farm (Malay, 2018; Moe, 2014; Parham & Westling, 2017). One instance repays sustained attention, because it is the structural opposite of the material assembled here.

Ted Hughes's *Crow* (1970) is not elegiac in any sense the *shahr ashob* would recognise. Hughes's bird does not mourn a fallen order; it outlasts one. Present at the creation, at the fall, and after the sequence runs from "Two Legends" through "A Childish Prank" to "Crow's Last Stand" Crow eats what is left and is moved by none of it, and his relation to catastrophe is neither grief nor indictment but a durable indifference. Where the *shahr ashob*'s poet is a witness who survives in order to enumerate what has gone, Hughes's crow is a survivor who does not witness at all. The carrion bird is the thing that persists when meaning does not.

Set against these, Bano Qudsia's vulture is a third term. It neither mourns nor endures indifferently, but it transmits. *Raja Gidh* makes the carrion-eater the vehicle of a corruption passing into whoever consumes what it consumes, which is to say the bird figures judgement rather than loss or survival. Elegy, indifference, contamination : three relations between the carrion bird and civilisational decline, of which the first belongs to a genre, the second to a poet, and the third to a novel. Urdu literature offers comparatively few such sustained explorations. One notable exception is Syed Rafiq Hussain (1894–1944), whose early twentieth-century short stories peopled by animal protagonists use satire and deep empathy to critique human conduct (S. R. Hussain, ca. 1930–1944/2012; Kidwai, 2012). The section that follows takes up a fourth relation, in which the bird is neither figure nor emblem but infrastructure, and it does so in a Pakistani novel written in English, which is where the vernacular archive assembled above meets the anglophone tradition surveyed here.

Vultures, Parsis, and the Towers of Silence

The paper closes, as it began, with the carrion bird. A couplet that circulates orally in Punjab, attributed alternately to Farid ud-Din Ganj-e-Shakar and to Bhagat Kabir and to our knowledge not securely established for either, addresses the crow: "*kaaga sab tan khaiyo mora, chun chun khaiyo maas / do chun naina mat khaiyo, mohe piya milan ki aas*" ("devour all of me, pick my flesh to pieces, but do not devour my eyes, for they await my beloved") (Macauliffe, 1909). The invitation evokes, for us, the image of the Parsi *dakhma*, where the dead are traditionally left to be devoured by vultures structures the British romanticised as

"Towers of Silence." It is not, perhaps, a comfortable claim, but we want to suggest that the near-extinction of vultures from Lahore has coincided with the exodus of a Parsi community that was once vibrant in the city, even as that community's migration to the West is clearly governed by other, more determinative factors as well.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* (1978/1990) the book that put both Sidhwa and Pakistani anglophone fiction on the international map takes its title from a subcontinental idiom, *kawe khayay thay*, in which anyone who talks excessively is said to have eaten crows. Inside the novel the idiom is not a genial self-description but a taunt: two children on a Lahore railway platform break from a passing procession to dance and chant "Parsi, Parsi, crow eaters!" at a knot of Parsi merry-makers, who absorb it with what the narrator calls "tolerant indulgence" (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, p. 56). The taunt is worth reading closely, because it is wrong twice over, and both errors matter.

It names the wrong bird: the rite for which the community is notorious involves the vulture, not the crow. And it reverses the direction of consumption grammatically, crow eaters are people who eat crows, whereas in the *dakhma* the vultures eat the Parsis. The city has produced a name for its Parsi population that misidentifies the species and inverts the predation, and has made that name a street chant sung by children. This is the condition the paper has been describing throughout: Lahore does not see its own animals accurately. It knows a bird is involved and does not know which, or in which direction. That Sidhwa took the phrase for her title rather than correcting it is the novel's first act of ecological criticism. The misrecognition is answered in the fifth chapter, where Sidhwa's narrator breaks from the comic plot into an ethnographic register to describe the *dakhma* introduced above. What is striking is that the description is technical rather than picturesque. The marble floor slopes toward a central hollow; ducts carry bone and blood to wells packed with lime, charcoal, and sulphur, which the narrator calls an "excellent filter." The outer rim holds fifty male bodies, then fifty females, the innermost ring reserved for children. The wall's height is calculated so precisely that a vulture taking off at full throttle can clear it only if carrying nothing (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, pp. 45).

The wall converts a wild scavenger into a bounded utility, letting the bird perform its function within a defined plot while preventing it from carrying anything across the boundary. The *dakhma* is a graveyard that uses birds instead of soil, and the wall is what makes it a graveyard rather than a dispersal. Sidhwa supplies the rationale in ecological and economic terms: the custom arose in rocky Persian terrain at a time when arable land was "too precious to be used as a graveyard," and was, she writes, both practical and hygienic (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, p. 45). Read against Gilmartin, this is significant. The *dakhma* is a mortuary technology necessitated by land scarcity precisely the arid, pastoral ecology of the pre-canal Indus basin, and precisely the terrain the revenue order would learn to classify as waste awaiting improvement (Gilmartin, 2003b, 2015). Exarnation resolves a problem that exists only where earth is too valuable to be given to the dead. By enclosing a wild scavenger within a property boundary, it constitutes the vulture as civic infrastructure, in the same idiom of boundary, function, and yield that Gilmartin (2003a) finds the colonial state applying to cattle. When Faredoon and Jerbanoo reach a Lahore with no Tower, they are not merely arriving somewhere that lacks a building. They are arriving in a landscape whose relations between land, death, and the animal have already been reorganised.

Jerbanoo's response is the novel's longest-running joke and its most theologically precise passage. Having discovered the city holds no *dakhma*, she refuses burial, threatens to walk worm-ridden to the nearest Tower, and reminisces about the Tower at Sanjan, set among

mango and gul-mohur trees, where the vultures were fat and handsome and "roosting like angels on every tree" (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, p. 46). Freddy takes the simile as a grotesque of the sublime, in poor taste. But Jerbanoo is not reaching for an image. A few pages later she tells him that at the first peck of the vultures "the angels will rush forth to escort me safely across the bridge" (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, p. 51) the Chinvat crossing, which in Zoroastrian eschatology the soul attempts on the fourth day after death (Boyce, 1979). The birds are not *like* angels; the first peck is what summonses them. Exarnation is the mechanism by which the soul is released to judgement, and the vulture a psychopomp with an ecological function attached. Freddy's inability to transfigure vultures into angels is therefore not a failure of taste but a failure of belief. Removing the vulture from this landscape does not merely remove a scavenger. It severs a soul's route out.

One aside here before we return to the vultures. Freddy takes the family for a drive in the *tonga* that had replaced his bullock-cart, clip-clopping over the Ravi Bridge into open country. That subordinate clause is a small history. The *tonga* is Faredoon's upgrade, the vehicle a rising merchant buys when the bullock-cart no longer suits his standing. It is the same vehicle from which, three decades later, Ustad Mangu will misread the constitutional order, and it is banned from the city in the late 1990s and replaced by the *qingqi*. Two substitutions, each presented as improvement, of which the second removes the animal altogether. Faredoon's ascent and the municipal ban are one gesture at different scales, and the *tonga* holds the top of that ladder for less than a century. Sidhwa's characters are riding one obsolescence out to look at another.

What they see is a *sheesham* whose rotten upper branches are crowded with vultures. Jerbanoo observes, with genuine pity, that the birds look lean and mangy, that they are permitted to starve despite all the Parsis in Lahore, and that "all these vultures are going to waste." Putli replies, reasonably, that one or two bodies a year could hardly fatten a multitude. Freddy, at the end of his patience, parodies Coleridge: "Vultures, vultures everywhere and not a body to share!" (Sidhwa, 1978/1990, pp. 50-51).

The joke is a scarcity joke with its terms reversed. Coleridge's mariner is surrounded by an element he cannot use; Jerbanoo is surrounded by a capacity that cannot be used on her behalf. And her word for the mismatch is "waste" the master category of colonial land policy in the basin (Gilmartin, 2003b), though she means by it almost exactly the opposite. For the revenue state, waste is unrealised productive capacity in land. For Jerbanoo, waste is unrealised consumptive capacity in a bird. Two incompatible economies of waste operate in the same landscape in the same moment, and Sidhwa, writing in English, has the pun available to her. She stages the collision without commentary.

The scene also complicates the correlation between vulture decline and Parsi exodus proposed at the head of this section. In Sidhwa's Lahore of the early twentieth century there is a surplus of vultures and a deficit of bodies, while in the Lahore of the present, a residual Parsi community remains and the vultures are gone. The relation has not weakened but inverted, and Jerbanoo's complaint is now unintelligible not because the community that could voice it has departed, but because the birds she pitied have. Lahore has failed to sustain the ritual relation twice, in opposite directions, a century apart.

One structural feature of the novel completes the argument. Jerbanoo does not die. She outlives Faredoon, whose death closes the book, and decades of rehearsed mortality never issue in the funeral she has spent the novel demanding. *The Crow Eaters* therefore never shows a Parsi death rite in Lahore. The withholding is not an oversight of plot but the condition the novel describes: Lahore cannot host the rite, so the novel cannot stage it. What

Sidhwa gives instead is a woman on a *tonga* on the far side of the Ravi, counting hungry birds in a tree and grieving in advance for a ceremony the city will never provide her. Her grief is proleptic in exactly Tishna's sense, organised around a calamity not yet arrived and knowable only through the condition of birds. That is an ecological *shahr ashob* in miniature, written in comedy rather than verse, and it enumerates its losses just as exactly.

Conclusion

South Asian literature offers an entry point into the narrative history of environment that municipal records, colonial gazetteers, and state archives do not preserve in the same register. The relationship between humans and non-human animals, legislated away by municipal ordinance, mourned in elegy and novel, remembered in the silence where a lion's roar or a songbird's call once was, remains a largely unexplored dimension of that history. This paper has mapped a set of instances rather than offered an exhaustive account. It has only begun to read that narrative history. Further work, drawing on environmental litigation records, oral history, and a wider range of Urdu and regional-language texts, is needed to substantiate the claim that literature can serve as primary evidence for Lahore's, and Pakistan's, environmental past.

What such an account would require next is a method adequate to its effect. This paper has treated grief, reproach, and anticipation as features of the texts it reads. A history-of-emotions approach would treat them as evidence in their own right, asking not only what Lahore lost but what emotional community formed around the losing, and whether the mourning of an animal follows the conventions that govern the mourning of a person or a city. The *shahr ashob* suggests that it does not, and that the difference is itself historical that a genre developed to mourn dynasties had to be modified, in the hands of a poet like Tishna, before it could mourn birds.

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