

THE INTIMATE CONTRACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY: HALEEMA HASHIM'S PRACTICE AND ITS AFTERLIVES

Mallika Leuzinger

In 1955, Haleema Hashim stands in front of a mirror, watching with quiet amusement as her husband Hashim Usman tentatively operates a Yashica film-roll camera. There is an outtake nature to the image they produce, Hashim's concentration, and Haleema's slightly glassy-eyed look implying a longer moment of experimenting with and being immersed in photography (c. 1950s, figure 1). In 2014, their great-grandson Nihaal Faizal began his art degree and learned that Haleema had photographed for over three decades. From over a 1000 contact prints of 6.35×6.35 cm shot on 120mm film which he collected and digitised, it was this photograph which Nihaal first publicised. It appeared under the caption 'My great-grandmother, the Incredible Photographer' on *Indian Memory Project*, 'an online, curated, visual and narrative based archive', marking Haleema out in the increasingly popular history of amateur and domestic photography in India.¹ It is a history that, in pertaining to photographic practices and performances in commercial studios, royal palaces and middle-/upper-class homes in the twentieth century, is being energised by the custodian projects of descendants and collectors and, in foregrounding how women became not only photographic subjects but also photographers, has been mobilised by institutions and scholars concerned with gender.² Haleema's youngest daughter Suman, while generally supportive of the new recognition of her mother's photography, raised one objection. She told Nihaal he 'shouldn't show *that* photograph. It's them in their bedroom alone!' Nihaal countered that 'it was such a nice picture because of that – because there was an intimacy you could read so directly, yet one so subtle'.³

Suman's concern was that the photograph deals in a marital intimacy between her parents that was sacred to the time and space of its taking/making. To display this image today would be inappropriate, as this intimacy would then figure as disregard for the comportment considered respectable



Figure 1 Haleema Hashim and Hashim Usman, *Self-portrait*, c. 1955. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

when appearing ‘in public’. Indeed, while browsing *Indian Memory Project*, it was Haleema’s delighted, conspiratorial smile and loose braid blurring into the swirled pattern on her sari, the slightly rumpled collar and creased lines of Hashim’s kurta which caused me to linger. The unexpected yet unmistakable informality of the interaction between the young couple, their bodies and the space between them emphasised by the mirror’s playful multiplications and divisions, perhaps led Nihaal to assume that ‘showing’ the photograph was an extension of its intimacy, rather than an act which might expose his great-grandparents, and possibly, the whole family, to censure from within and beyond their community.

Suman's and Nihaal's diametrically divergent responses to the image put the problematic of intimacy at the heart of the photographic encounter. As the ongoing relationality between photographer, camera, photographed subject, and viewer (intended or otherwise), this encounter was arguably always already intimate.⁴ Yet recently, there has been a noticeable turn to the intimate (photographic) archive, which, alongside *Indian Memory Project*, has inspired prominent artists such as Vivan Sundaram and Dayanita Singh to work with their family photographs, as well as institutional collaborations such as 'Re-Presenting Indian Women 1875–1947: A Visual Documentary', organised by the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi, and supported by the Confederation of Indian Industry, India International Centre and The Japan Foundation.⁵ This 2001 exhibition was so successful that it resulted in a coffee-table book and annual calendar, bringing the painstakingly collected and digitised images of women at work, at home, in the Independence movement and in relation to diverse sartorial cultures (back) to middle-class living rooms.⁶ In this context, intimacy bubbles over: as familiarity, loving, trust, invitation, sharing, separation, intrusion, (mis) appropriation, and contamination, Derrida noting that 'there is *no one intimacy*, only modalities of intimacy'.⁷ The slippage and friction between different modalities is shaping a new historiographic, artistic and entrepreneurial landscape – and urges critical attention.

Born in 1928 in Rangoon, Haleema (née Abdulla, and known as 'Ummijaan' by her family) was from the Kutchi Memon community of Sunni Muslim traders who migrated from the north-western province of Kutch to various parts of the subcontinent and the Gulf. Her family soon relocated to the south-Indian port of Cochin, joining the roughly 500 Kutchi Memon families who had settled there since 1815 and remain close-knit through marriage, business, religion and the Kutchi dialect.⁸ In 1946, Haleema married Hashim Usman, and thereafter moved to 'Yasmin Manzil', the joint-family house in the old Fort Cochin neighbourhood. It was in and around 'Yasmin Manzil' that Haleema photographed her sons, daughters, nephews, and nieces in various stages and scenes of childhood, her sisters-in-law and elder female relatives, and occasionally, the men in the family. Striking portraits of individuals, for instance of her niece Naheed posing with stylish confidence before the house's art deco entrance (c. 1950s, figure 2), or of her husband's sister Fathima candidly facing the camera, her arms crossed over a



Figure 2 Haleema Hashim, *Naheed Nayeem*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

book (c. 1950s, figure 3), sometimes give way to bodies crowding together for the obligatory ‘group photograph’; her framing catching movement, light beams, facial expressions, gestures, alignments and juxtapositions. These stopped when Haleema’s youngest children had grown up and her health began to deteriorate, knee and back pain preventing her from engaging in the active camera-work she was used to. At around this time, photography itself became problematic for certain members of the family and the wider community as an increasingly conservative religious atmosphere gained sway.⁹ When Haleema passed away in May 2017, Nihaal’s intervention had,



Figure 3 Haleema Hashim, *Fathima Abdulla*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

however, breathed new life into her photography as the vision of an unlikely (because female, because Muslim, because self-taught) artist, and a glimpse into Kutchi Memon life, most notably through '*Ummijaan: Making Visible a World Within*', a partner-project exhibition at India's premier international art event, the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2014. While also causing apprehension, the Director of Programmes Riyas Komu hailed the 66 photographs curated by Nihaal, framed and hung up for the first time, as 'very intimate Kochi imagery . . . reflective of our engagements at the biennale; it brings out the hidden stories and talents of our region'.¹⁰

Haleema's photographic practice and its afterlives thus encourage us to reflect on intimacy, photography, archives and the multiple – sometimes

fraught – orientations and claims that constitute Indian modernity. This article attempts this via Ariella Azoulay’s conceptualisation of the photographic encounter, which is directed towards an explicit engagement with the affective and embodied politics of intimacy. In tracing how these relationalities ‘contract’ photography, it puts theories of photography in conversation with histories of gender and sexuality in South Asia concerned with non-institutional archives and domestic histories, and takes seriously a photographic encounter that, in becoming so easily accessible as well as representative, is in danger of being elided.

In *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), and *Civil Imagination* (2012), Azoulay argues that photography is a political relationality.¹¹ Those who in the usual terms of citizenship are marginalised or excluded have equal claims on a photograph’s meaning or life, and must be recognised in ‘the practices of both picture taking and the public use and display of photographs’.¹² This means ‘watching’ (Azoulay prefers this term to ‘looking’ because it invokes temporality and movement – yet it also implies an aspect of surveillance which will prove important)¹³ how Haleema, prolific and self-driven in her desire to photograph, was one of several Indian women from different religious and cultural, if generally middle-class, backgrounds who took up photography after the appearance of the film-roll camera in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ We are moved to ask how and where she engaged with photographic spaces, subjects, technologies and visual cultures; how she articulated this engagement to herself and to others (as art? as hobby? as a solitary practice or a familial obligation?); and what legacies her photography generated or became part of. These questions correspond to feminist South Asian historiography’s commitment to envisioning women as political participants in Indian modernity, especially in the wake of Partha Chatterjee’s provocative essay, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ (1990).¹⁵ Keen to understand how women’s activities constructed, interrupted and were obscured by nationalism, upper-class Hindu/Muslim femininity, domesticity, and social reform, this scholarship is heavily text-based, relying on women’s writings, and even there, only recently on literature.¹⁶ Expanding this field of enquiry to aesthetics through photography can, moreover, respond to the broader postcolonial ‘concern with transnational cultural and political configurations’ given the medium’s inherently transnational development, and productively reframe

photography itself by disturbing boundaries and assumptions around ‘global’, ‘local’, ‘private’, ‘public’, ‘domestic’, ‘amateur’, ‘professional’ and ‘artistic’ practices, archives and contexts.¹⁷

Azoulay’s conceptualisation of photography also recognises the unusual subjects of Haleema’s photography: stropy toddlers, pliable children, awkward teenagers, blushing brides, and strict in-laws. Some grew up in front of her camera, while many had never been photographed before, and a few actually objected to it on religious grounds, seeing the depiction of humans and animals as anathema to Islam.¹⁸ Yet all posed, made demands and appeared or disappeared, whether as the heads eagerly pressed against the window above an orderly and somber-looking assemblage of children (c. 1950s, figure 4), or the sari-clad figure whose face is concealed by a shadowy doorway behind the photograph’s cherubic subject, Rafeeq (c. 1950s, figure 5). Azoulay champions the camera’s stubborn participation in the photographic encounter through its tendency to include people and spaces not intended by the photographer or subject.¹⁹ The arm steadying a somewhat-older Rafeeq in a swing is suddenly intriguing (c. 1950s, figure 6): might it belong to one of the staff who lived in Yasmin Manzil and was employed to cook, clean, and help take care of the children? Antoinette Burton, analysing the family memoirs of Janaki Mazumdar, the daughter of Indian nationalist Womesh Chunder Bonnerjee and his wife Hemangini, observes that the treatment of servants is

evidence of the silences and violences of all archives, even those that act as counternarratives to dominant histories, as Janaki’s does. Far from rendering all gendered subjectivities more legible, it foregrounds some – like Hemangini’s and Janaki’s – from the recesses of nationalist history, only to obscure others that make the Bonnerjee women’s identities possible.²⁰

In Haleema’s photography, the absence of servants as direct subjects, the rare appearance of anyone who is not Kutchi Memon, the predominance of Yasmin Manzil as setting seem a similar exclusion. They imply a reluctance, or an inability to embrace certain subjects and spaces, and yet, against the textual erasures of Janaki’s memoirs, these images and the memories they set in motion, gesture to the subaltern possibilities of photography, its radical, if subtle, contingency.



Figure 4 Haleema Hashim, *Group photograph at Yasmin Manzil*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

Azoulay's argument necessitates, too, an awareness of the spectators who view, circulate, and contribute to the discourse on the images.²¹ Nihaal has come to occupy a difficult and important position as guardian and spokesperson for Haleema's photography, a process he understands as:

a new connection to Ummijaan, something we have in common. But I also discovered it quite late, when she was already old and bed-ridden [and losing her memory]. Then I also started finding out about the family's history. I can tell who is related to who, and how; I made an effort to understand my family



Figure 5 Haleema Hashim, *Rafeeq Ismail*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

and its connections and its links, to become close to all these people and then understood them much more. Even now, photographing them, talking to all my relatives, my extended family, my grandfather's sisters' mother-in-law for instance . . . the camera is a tool . . .²²

Nihaal's intervention into Haleema's photography through his own photography, curation, and conversations is precisely that – his own. Margaret Olin has noted 'the extraordinary series of slippages between people and images, and between modes of identification' in Roland Barthes' meditations

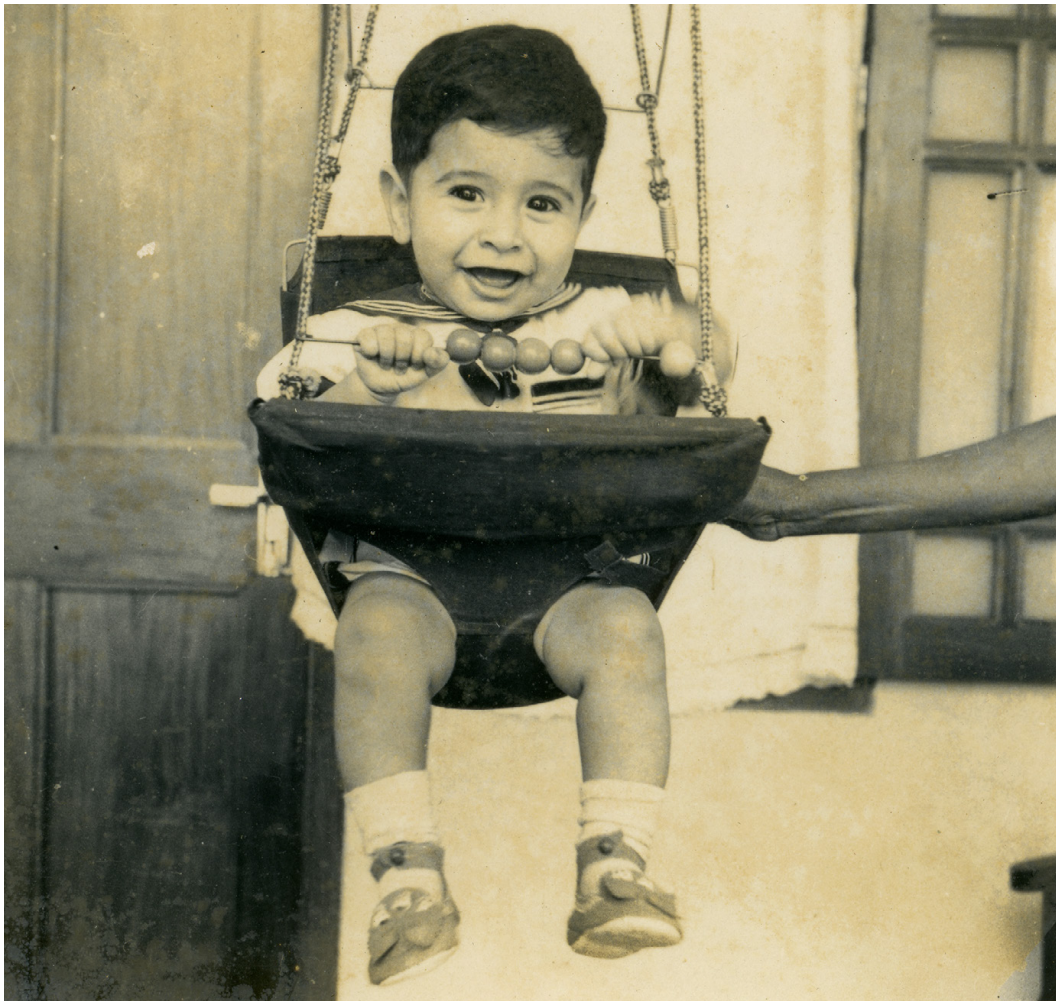


Figure 6 Haleema Hashim, *Rafeeq Ismail*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

on his family photographs, while Edward Said acknowledged his failure to recognise the old lady in a photograph taken by the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr as his relative Mrs Farraj.²³ Nihaal's attachment to Haleema's photography involves blind-spots, exaggerations and misidentifications, for it is also marked by separation and loss, and the priorities of a (single member of a) new generation looking back, needing to archive, share and name intimacy. Yet while Barthes' and Said's photographic encounters, prompted by tragedy (in Barthes' case by the death of his mother, and in Said's case, by the displacement of Palestinian people and their/his experience of exile) have been critically framed, the configuration of Haleema's photography,

both preceding and through Nihaal, does not claim or situate itself within an obvious framework.

Its intimacy is, for instance, liable to slip through the specific political focus of Azoulay's argument, which, based on the violence and trauma of occupation in Palestine, 'seeks to imagine a civil discourse under conditions of regime-made disaster'.²⁴ Writing on Indian photography, such as Zahid Chaudhury's *Afterimage of Empire* (2012), similarly sees photography as a negotiation of colonial dispossession in its focus on institutional archives, historic events and photographs of rebellions, massacres and famines from colonial collections, even as its methodology of affect and phenomenology lends itself to other images.²⁵ Christopher Pinney's work most closely approximates the spaces and relations of Haleema's photography in analysing local and vernacular practices and contexts such as studio photography, especially through his long-running fieldwork in the provincial town of Nagda.²⁶ Pinney contends that by:

embracing this technology with its individuating dynamic, and the photographic studio as a prophetic space for making things 'come out better', Indians have also engaged, in a profound everyday sense, with the experiential epistemology of what – for want of a better word – we might call democracy: representing themselves to themselves.²⁷

However, while Pinney maintains the political momentum of photography by locating a democratic orientation in the everyday aesthetic experiments and performances of the studio, the question of what is happening in the spaces and relations of the home, and of exhibited, virtualised and memorialised domestic and amateur archives remains open. To answer it is not to foreclose a civil imagination around photography as a 'space of relations between people who are exposed to one another in public',²⁸ but to dwell for a moment on the political possibilities and problems of the intimate. Referring to Derrida's writings, the literary critic Thomas Dutoit describes how intimacy:

pertains to a one-on-one relation (between me and my alter ego, between me and my friend or my lover), yet the intimate relation is itself always already in relation to the non-intimate relation: with the third, with the public, with society, with the law . . . intimacy as a one-on-one relation is thus impossible

save insofar as mediated by the third. In other words, intimacy is impossible because of the third, which makes for its only possibility.²⁹

The rendering of intimacy as a constant and contingent blurring of the ‘public’ and ‘private’, of the formal and the informal, provides a foundation for reflecting on a photographic encounter that has no established terms or register and yet is continuously contracted.

Most immediately, it addresses the development of Haleema’s photography within intimate infrastructures such as the family, the home, the gift, and memory. Haleema began photographing when her husband received an Agfa Isolette III from Saleh Mohammad, a wealthy relative who acquired it while abroad on business. This first camera, now with her daughter Yasmin, was replaced by the Yashica, which Haleema gifted to her son Arif (Nihaal’s grandfather) when he expressed an interest in photography.³⁰ This movement of the camera as an object to gift and to inherit within the family might have introduced the expectation that it be used for photographing the family. Haleema’s photographic activity certainly became deeply embedded in these immediate relationships and contexts. She photographed all eight of her children, beginning with the boys Arif and Anwar in 1949, and ending with her identical twin daughters Suman and Kiran in the 1970s. Her niece Tasneem Arif (who married Arif and is Nihaal’s grandmother) describes Haleema’s photography as a social activity that vividly marked her own childhood:

I remember our photographic excursions to Subash Park in Ernakulam. We would go there at noon, when the sun was its strongest. *Ummi* and the kids from Fort Cochin would come there with the driver and we would meet them at the park, as we lived close by. All the kids would get very excited and would get dressed in nice clothes with bright colours. The whole thing revolved around photography. We would quickly go, take the pictures and leave, as it would be too hot. On Saturdays, we would go to her house in Fort Cochin, though, and that’s when she took those pictures of us there.³¹

Haleema’s photography, thus remembered, represented and brought together the extended family in a familiar geography of people, places and performances. However, the use of ‘we’ and the mention of ‘the driver’

bely the ambiguity of just who was being contracted into this photographic familiarity/familiarity, while the movement from public park to multiple private homes in different Cochin neighbourhoods reframes the 'domestic' quality of her photography. Though Annette Kuhn notes how 'the family album [. . .] produces particular forms of family in particular ways', the interchangeability of spaces, and the presence of intimate 'others' – not quite family, not quite not family – labouring within this picture of middle-class conviviality scuppers the production of any too nostalgic or predictable intimacy.³²

In fact, not all interpretations of Haleema's photography were as fond or technicoloured as Tasneem's. In 1950, Haleema started photographing Kutchi Memon brides, the first of whom was her sister-in-law Fathima.³³ Most often featuring the bride alone, these photographs exude a patient and attentive relationality between photographer and subject, though children and other busybodies sometimes get in the way (c. 1950s, figure 7), and the shyness and uncertainty in a bride's pose or expression is palpable. Even Fathima, whose direct and light-hearted engagement with the camera is so notable elsewhere, turns her head to the side and pulls her sari tight around her head (1950, figure 8). To me, they suggest a 'working out' of photography, of how Haleema as one of the only photographers in her community, and the sole woman wielding a camera, developed her practice by turning particular moments in the cultural life of her community to which she had access into photographic opportunities and aesthetic departures from her usual style, simultaneously providing the bride and her family with beautiful, and hitherto inconceivable representations of themselves. Around 1965, an older female relative prohibited Haleema from photographing a bride, saying that it was 'un-Islamic'. Haleema told Nihaal that the incident 'deeply hurt and insulted her', leading her to cease this practice.³⁴ Although I am wary of drawing conclusions from a memory-of-a-memory, such censure certainly obstructed her ability to share her photography with others, and to have it acknowledged as belonging to her family culture, or a valuable activity in its own right. As an instance of Derrida's identification of 'the enemy [as] an intimate member of the family', it conveys the double-edgedness of the intimacy which structured Haleema's photography.³⁵

Intimacy can mean precarity, especially when Haleema's photographic engagements are contrasted with those of other women active at the time.



Figure 7 Haleema Hashim, *Zaibunisa Abdulla*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

Prominent among Haleema's contemporaries are the Bengali twins Debalina Majumdar and Manobina Roy, who participated in amateur photography clubs and exhibitions, and Homai Vyarawalla, one of India's first photojournalists. All three lived with family members who shared an interest in photography and had access to a darkroom, photography equipment and manuals,³⁶ whereas Haleema had to source film rolls and get prints developed at the local photographic studios, which she persuaded her husband to do on his evening walks.³⁷ Majumdar, Roy and Vyarawalla, moreover, could photograph widely, training their lens on relatives, friends, strangers, public



Figure 8 Haleema Hashim, *Fathima Abdulla*, 1950. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

figures and events, objects and landscapes, at home and in other cities and countries; and develop their practice in relation to the work and feedback of other photographers. They were known during their lifetimes as skilled photographers, and significantly for their legacies, their images have entered institutional archives.

While such cosmopolitan and formal mobilities inflect Haleema's photography, they are markedly fleeting. Her portrait of her daughter Jabeen as a baby was published by the Urdu women's magazine *Hoor* in the late 1950s, and a stamp bearing her name and address, which she used in correspondence with penfriends and relatives, appears on the backs of some images as was popular among commercial and amateur photographers. Yet none of

Haleema's immediate family remembers how Haleema came to possess the stamp nor what happened to it in the intervening years, and though Jabeen excitedly identified her photograph in Nihaal's digitised collection, the copy of the magazine it was featured in cannot be found.³⁸ Meanwhile, of the photographic studios they recall by name, one has shut up shop, while the other is about to, having preserved its 'historic' photographs of nineteenth-century Cochin, the Nationalist Movement, and famous personalities, but discarded the spare and unclaimed prints of Haleema's time.³⁹

The lack of a robust infrastructure or determined legacy around Haleema's photography is most acute in Haleema's own relationship to (keeping) her photographs. She initially ordered and stuck many into albums, with corners to hold each image in place, which she stored in a bedroom cupboard. When the children asked to see them, Haleema would take them out, instructing them to be careful not to tear the thin paper between the photographs.⁴⁰ In 1995, Yasmin Manzil became a school for students with special needs, and the different branches of the family moved into separate apartments in Fort Cochin. Upon reuniting in Bay Pride Apartments, a newly-constructed tower block in the burgeoning financial district of Ernakulam in 2006, Haleema distributed the albums amongst her children and told Tasneem, 'take whatever you want of these pictures. Everyone take their own pictures, now where am I going to care for them? I don't think I can do it anymore.'⁴¹ She also burnt her negatives. These acts and articulations of destruction, dispersion and disassociation suggest an embodied and affective response to the displacement of her photographs from her own bedroom in a much-loved home to new spaces, and her inability to maintain them due to her deteriorating health.⁴² By the time I met Haleema, her dementia had left her unable to recall her photography, but even when her mind was sharp, there is a sense in which she simply and pragmatically let photography go, devoting her time to more stationary activities such as knitting, such that while her children and grandchildren associated her with photographs, her great-grandchildren knew her through the sweaters she made them. And so, when Nihaal found the photographs that had survived this 'purge' in a spare-room cupboard in 2012, and convinced Haleema to let him digitise and keep them, it is possible Haleema no longer saw herself as bound to them.⁴³

If Haleema's photography – in its initial containment and eventual unmooring – seems limited in relation to the practices and archival afterlives

of her contemporaries, it is worth recalling Anjali Arondekar's critique of the historiography of sexuality and intimacy in South Asia and its attachment to 'archives'. Arondekar speculates on the histories/historiographies that might result from 'an unsettling of that attachment, from a movement away from the recursive historical dialectic of fulfilment and impoverishment'.⁴⁴ Though Arondekar's work does not include visual sources, it proposes an imaginative methodology, which, for me, means working phenomenologically with Haleema's photography. Rather than willing it to form an archive, and lamenting its failure to do so as the loss of a special (because intimate?) history, this failure can be read as part of the complex and conflicting relations of intimacy itself: the embodied and affective performances, struggles, intensities and fluctuations of living with and relating to one's self and others. Instead of a coherent record or representation, photography comes to be the playfulness, shyness, boldness, happiness, melancholy, anger, anxiousness and/or weariness of leaning into the image, of becoming the image, and of beholding and preserving the image. It is these sorts of feelings and doings that drive the photographic encounter, and which break the surface of 'the practices of both picture taking and the public use and display of photographs'.⁴⁵

Consider a photograph of Zainab, Haleema's husband's sister (c. 1950s, figure 9). Having never married on account of a heart condition, she lived at Yasmin Manzil and became a dear – and daring – subject of Haleema's photography.⁴⁶ She appears content and comfortable, her sari draped loosely around her, a bit of arm showing between the short sleeve of her blouse and the sari *palu*, the pages of a magazine she is holding curving over her lap to reveal an advertisement for *Sansar*, a family drama brought out by Gemini film studios in 1951. There is an elegant immediacy and deliberateness in the photograph's composition. Its framing privileges how Zainab is connected to the magazine, so that it is difficult to ascertain the space behind and around her, whether she is alone or in the company of others. As in the self-portrait of Hashim and Haleema, the viewer is close in (only) the picture's space, the recipient, or guest, of this photographic encounter, and of Zainab's ready gaze.

Watching this photograph indicates the lively interactions between Haleema, her camera, and the people in front of it, who were also its first spectators. Tasneem remembers how Haleema:



Figure 9 Haleema Hashim, *Zainab Usman*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm.
Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

would say, in Kutchi, “move your face towards the light”; or “the light’s coming from there, if you stand there the light will show nicely.” “Stand as if the light is coming from behind you.” “Move this side.” “Stand by the window.” “Sit there”, “stand there” – “by the door”, “by the window”. Things like that . . . She would make us stand in the garden or on the staircase . . . “Stand with a smile.” “Look here.” “Look there.”⁴⁷

A picture emerges of Haleema circumventing the limited focusing ability of the Agfa Isolette III and Yashica cameras, insisting on particular lighting and locations, drawing out the tonalities of black and white film, or trying

her hand at colour photography in order to ‘make’ a composition from the slightest gestures or expressions. The strong imprint these activities and orientations have left on Tasneem suggest, also, how her subjects familiarised themselves with this process, at times interfering or resisting. While Haleema’s photography was probably informed by studio practices – the main photographic experience she and her family knew before she began to photograph – this immersive quality eluded their photographic encounters in the local studios. Tasneem’s recollections of these sessions are brief: on occasions such as her marriage anniversary or a child’s birthday, ‘we would go together, never alone’, such that it was a rushed, crowded, alienating experience of having one’s image ‘taken’, one after the other.⁴⁸ When pressed for more detail, Tasneem criticised how

the pictures in the studio were highly made up. We would apply make up . . . The pictures at the studio would seem like they were too still . . . our eyes, our eyebrows would look completely artificial. They would be made dark and distorted.⁴⁹

Tasneem’s description harbours a keen loyalty to her aunt and mother-in-law and perhaps a dislike for the studio experience that was personal to her, for as Pinney has shown, the studio could be a space of fun, play and fantasy.⁵⁰ But unlike their presence in Haleema’s photographs, the same people appear stiff and reserved in their studio portraits. An image of Zainab shows her photographed alone, yet there is little individuality about her. Her sari, while delicately embroidered, is almost indistinguishable from the studio background, and her expression is unreadable. Faced with such a picture, Tasneem gravitates back to Haleema’s photography to say it ‘was more natural . . . Ummijaan’s pictures were nice. They were nice to look at’.⁵¹ While ‘nice’ is a word easily dismissed, it was also used by Nihaal – a professional artist and the member of his family most inclined to expand on the technical and aesthetic details of Haleema’s photography – to describe his great-grandparents’ self-portrait. It seems to capture a sense of feeling welcomed and a preference for simplicity over sophistication. Despite the demanding attributes of Haleema’s camera work, so many of her subjects appear confident and at ease, I would venture to say happy. Haleema’s photography *instills* intimacy between the photographer and

the photographed, and the photograph and its viewer, pulling them into a momentary sociability.

A similar sociability was contracted through reading, an activity that bridged generations, households and even communities. Haleema's mother was highly-literate and multi-lingual, inculcating a love for reading in Haleema, which she, in turn, shared with her sisters-in-law and own children.⁵² Haleema read newspapers, magazines, and novels in Malayalam, Urdu, Hindi and English. In the 1950s and 60s, she subscribed to the Urdu magazines *Shamma*, *Sitara*, *Baanu*, and *Hoor*, to which she sent Jabeen's photograph. These 'filmi magazines' with articles about film stars and fashion, glossy advertisements, and serialised stories were eagerly awaited and always shared amongst the women in the house and the female relatives next door. They featured a 'penfriends' column with names and addresses, through which Haleema entered into long-running friendships with women in Bombay, Rangoon and Madras.⁵³ Scholarship on how the thriving literary and magazine cultures of the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century constituted a 'public sphere', in which middle-class Indian women understood and negotiated their social and political status – also against the grain of what they read – and made new intellectual and aesthetic connections in the charged context of a decolonising and post-partition India, underscores the range of politics in motion here.⁵⁴

It is poignant that moments of reading or being with books and magazines mark Haleema's photography, because it speaks of their affinity. Photography, like reading, was an act of pausing, posing, looking up from, re-arranging and re-visioning everyday activities, relations and objects in a strictly-run patriarchal household in a quiet locality. Both happened when the men were at their offices (first in Fort Cochin, and later in Ernakulam) and many of the children at school, though they could occasionally be cajoled and co-opted into these performances, as in the photograph of a beaming Anwar carrying the English-language magazine *Screen Stories*, the heads of an actor couple poking out from under the crook of his arm (c. 1950s, figure 10). They thus stand as forms of playing with, if not subverting, these structures.⁵⁵

In the photograph of Zainab (figure 9), the playfulness is in how she is positioned among and against the models of femininity proposed by studio portraits, magazines, and films. While the reading materials featured in Haleema's oeuvre are not always discernable, this image presents an open page. We are faced with the women that Zainab holds in her hand, and



Figure 10 Haleema Hashim, *Anwar Hashim*, c. 1950s. Photograph, 6.35 × 6.35 cm. Courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

how artificial they appear, again as floating heads, cut and pasted onto paper. These faces and figures, the result of models and actresses being photographed by other (professional) photographers in other places, become humorously equivalent, or even inferior, to the casual and personable image that Haleema and Zainab produce. And while they are susceptible to the turning of the page, the cruelties and caprices of an anonymous and unpredictable audience hungry for, yet morally judgmental of, the femininities of ‘filmi’ culture,⁵⁶ Zainab’s portrait is protected by its materialisation and movement through familiar, or more precisely, sisterly, hands. This improvisation

and personalisation – a making intimate – of the modes of conventional photography and contemporary culture renders Haleema's photography a gendered, middle-class, cosmopolitan, trans-generational and multimedia contract.⁵⁷

Yet what is happening to this contract on *Indian Memory Project*, and in the highly-reviewed and attended Kochi Muziris Biennale? These contexts, having grown from epistemological, artistic, commercial and personal investments in the intimate image/archive, can entail difficult cohabitations. For '*Ummijaan: Making Visible a World Within*', Haleema's sister-in-law Kulsum opposed the display of photographs in which she and her daughter appeared. She insisted that she was not modestly dressed, as she wore a sari and not a burkha, which became the dress-code amongst the women in the family from the 1990s onwards. Nihaal, however, supported by his grandparents and parents, and the majority of the family's enthusiasm for the exhibition, felt that other priorities took precedence. Chief among them was acknowledging Haleema's photography – especially her portraits of women – as a unique and artistic vision. Having decided to proceed, Nihaal explained:

we had to keep a special opening for the extended family with a censored version of the exhibition to which Kulsum chachi also came. [Afterwards] I hung back the pictures and let the show on. Kulsum chachi heard about this and demanded they be taken down, so I promised to hang a black cloth over it. My grandmother stitched these and I installed them onto the frames with my mother. Now the pictures of Kulsum chachi were installed in the gallery veiled. I positioned the decision on to the visitors – they could choose to lift the veils and see the pictures, or pass them by un-seen.⁵⁸

In publicising Haleema's photography in this way, Nihaal attempted to recognise the multiple claims on her photography by her relatives – its photographic subjects – alongside his own. The exhibition was his as much as theirs to sign off on; and along with partaking in its curation and installation, they attended it, gathering around, pointing out, reminiscing about, and photographing Haleema's images amongst and for themselves. Still, the exhibition extended the opportunity of entering the spontaneous and immersive spaces and relations of Haleema's photography to strangers, i.e., it contracted 'out' its intimacy.

Derrida writes of the

intruder who is outside intimacy, yet also inside intimacy because intimacy is an effect of the intruder, an intruder that *must have been*, would have to have been, *a priori*. The intruder is the third who is already there at the heart of any intimacy.⁵⁹

Even if Haleema's photography always contained an 'intruder', a 'third', the stranger invited to step close to and lift the veils over the photographs cannot and may not wish to understand its intimacy on Haleema's, or Zainab's, or Kulsum's, or Nihaal's terms. The 'game' of her photography has shifted, and for every visitor who 'peeks' behind the veils in 'good faith', or passes by them sympathetically, there is the possibility of one who will censure, judge, misinterpret, trespass, insist. Is the intimacy in play now *only* between 'thirds', between 'intruders'? Might Kulsum's religious convictions to some prove a quaint eccentricity that authenticates and further interiorises the 'world within' they are discovering? In this case, the veils risk functioning as a gimmick rather than a pragmatic and collaborative solution to an issue of consent, and flatten the anxieties and ambitions of the individuals pictured behind them.

In his article on 'The Digital Afterlife of Lost Family Photos', Teju Cole asks what it means for individuals, especially people of colour, to be automatically 'tagged' on Facebook photographs, to be visualised precisely *as* a minority or *through* one's difference.⁶⁰ Cole's question emphasises Kulsum's uneasy status as a Muslim woman in post-independence India (currently ruled by the Hindu fundamentalist party of Narendra Modi), as a Kutchi Memon in Cochin, and possibly, too, as someone sidelined by others in her family, and her reluctance to being (made) visible for the sake of what is felt, however imprecisely, to be someone else's art. This line of enquiry urges, then, that Haleema's photography be not only part of a moment in which Indian domesticity is being re-visioned or re-presented; of an impulse to 'recover' and 'uncover', and even nationalise the intimate as an archive, but something that shifts and reworks these attachments. Here, Derrida continues to offer guidance in his speculation that 'intimacy is not the experience of the innermost, but rather that of a limit'.⁶¹ As Haleema's photography develops in and through her family, the internet, the international art circuit and this

article, its intimacy startles, pushes, plays with, invites, dwells in and haunts its spectators to reflect and respond in kind.

Notes

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