


10-22-2022

## Perils of Heavy Rainfall: Displacement and Resettlement Driven by Floods

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### Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Hemani, Shumaila. "Perils of Heavy Rainfall: Displacement and Resettlement Driven by Floods." *The Goose*, vol. 19 , no. 2 , article 1, 2022,  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol19/iss2/1>.

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## SHUMAILA HEMANI

### *Perils of Heavy Rainfall*

*Perils of Heavy Rainfall (Second Prize, Listening in the Time of COVID contest organized by the Canadian Association of Sound Ecology (CASE)) represents sounds of heavy rainfall and children's chanting recorded in Pakistan in 2020 with a Sufi singing style called the Shah jo Raag (also the focus of Hemani's dissertation). This verse is from the Sur Sarang within the Sufi poetry by Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai called the Risalo and learned at the dargah of Latif from Faqir-Ustad Jumman Shah. This recording features Hemani on the vocals and Mehdi Rezanian on Santur (recorded in Edmonton Studios, Alberta, Canada). To listen to Perils of Heavy Rainfall please click [here](#) or find Hemani's debut album: Mannat (a prayer, a wish) which is out on all digital platforms.*

Black clouds circle the sky. Thunder strikes.

Neighbours' children rush to their terrace and begin singing excitedly for the rain to fall soon. Their song is a nostalgic awakening of how blissful monsoon is:

Girna hoga, Girna Hoga  
Baarish ko aaj girna hoga

Must fall, Must fall.  
The rain today must fall.

They scream with joy as the winds blow more vigorously and the rain pours heavily, dampening their joyful chants. Here, I am enjoying the blessings of a patio at my parents' home in Karachi, my hometown.

Power outages. The generators whirl from multiple units in three apartment buildings that encircle our apartment.

Winds blow strongly, and the branches of the tree sway by the pressures of a raging storm.

The birds protect their flocks under roofs and some lonesome ones left behind shelter themselves under wet tree leaves planting their feet firmly onto the branches as the tree sways to-and-fro with the raging gales and violent outpours.

I wonder: will rainfall be a blessing in disguise?

For those surviving on daily earnings, rainfall could be both a time of better business as well as a hazard.

An ice-cream man cycles his bike playing the popular Wall's ice cream tune that brings back memories of my childhood. I can hear it when the rain stops momentarily and between each bolt of lightning. But, unfortunately, the tune is soon drowned out by the sound of heavy downpour.

How will he reach home today?

We are in the summer lockdowns of 2020. Yet, as the number of afflicted keep rising internationally, there is another catastrophe embroiling locally.

Within a few hours, a new reality emerges from my room's window. Heavy currents of water flood the streets, making it impossible for the vehicles to move. When we owned a car, our mother would rush to the garage to move the car lest it drown in the floods in the underground parking lot. But now, with half my family in Canada, rain does not seem as problematic.

There is havoc today for all who are coming back home from work.

Two women fall off a three-wheeled rickshaw as it overturns side-ways due to strong currents.

Vehicles turn upside down as the currents resist movement.

Several cars drown in the rain. A man falls off his motorcycle, and he floats away with the heavy flow of water. People rush after to save him.

Observers on the street help the fallen and also make videos that will later go viral on WhatsApp.

The news tells us a striking tale of a man putting himself at risk to save a drowning dog.

I am transported to memories of the monsoon when I was five. My brother and I were playing in the early morning rain outside our grandparents' house. The rain had stopped and all the kids had gone back inside their houses. The lane was empty but wholly flooded. I stepped into the puddle to get my feet wet as I loved the rainwater. Alas, I slipped, and in the next moment I found myself in a manhole with my head barely above the water, holding tightly to its edges, afraid I would fall in at any moment.

It felt like one of those nightmares in which even when you are shouting for help, you find your voice to be imprisoned in your throat, feeling unheard. Then with a jolt, something pushes you

to wake up, and you take a sigh of relief that it was all a dream and yes, indeed, your voice hasn't left you.

But, this was real. My voice was not loud enough to reach inside the house for someone to rescue me. Yet, in a heaven-sent moment, I heard my seven-year-old elder brother calling out my name from the door. I put all my energy towards holding on to the edge of the manhole as my hands kept slipping. I was red and sore. Any moment, I could lose my grip and fall into the sewer. So many people die in Pakistan every year this way.

Then his voice faded. He probably had gone back inside the house; it will be a while before people come outside to find me. I won't survive, I thought. My eyes closed, and I silently prayed for a miracle.

Then, suddenly, my eyes opened and caught the side of my brother's feet standing close to me. I called out to him. He could not see me at first because my head was half-buried in the rainwater. I called out again. He saw me, thank goodness. He exclaimed,

"What are you doing there?"

"I will fall any moment. Rescue me, please."

He reached out his hand. I took his hand, but he could not lift me. I was afraid I'd bring him down in the manhole, too. He was very anxious now.

"Wait, I'll bring someone from inside."

I shook my head. "I can't wait; I'll slip."

Then, an idea struck me. I said to him, "You stay exactly where you are and don't move. Ground yourself there and pull my hand."

I then put all the weight of my body on my other hand and pushed it tightly against the edge of the manhole as I allowed myself to be uplifted.

In a moment, this nightmare was over, and I was standing beside my brother. And we went inside to take a shower, hiding from the elders lest they admonish us and would not allow me to play in the rain again.

A crow caws. It has taken refuge on a tree trunk. It sits there waiting for the rain to end. I stare at the crow sitting on the trunk; its wisdom tells me to be patient. So I am waiting and anticipating the world to shift to normal.

I had found myself seeking refuge from the challenges of the international lockdown. Locked out from the borders of Canada due to COVID-19, I found my way back to my estranged father living in our family house.

The rain does not make us all abundant. In many homes, not very far from mine, but part of the same city and around it, poor children flee, carrying their animals and necessities, escaping the perils of heavy rainfall.

A kid picks up his sheep and carries it alongside the valuables of his low-income family. Will he be safe walking in through the flooding water? How will the sanitary conditions impact his hygiene? Who will survive in his family this year?

The sun sets, and the call to prayer, azaan, comes from different mosques in the vicinity.

News on television and papers brings stories of displacement and death, detailing the havoc that heavy monsoon brings. This era, with an ongoing pandemic, heralds much suffering within.

Our fears speak louder in silence.

### **Afterword**

*Displacement is an acousmatic composition based on the epochal floods in Pakistan that have impacted 33 million people. It features excerpts from the speech by the UN Secretary, Antonio Guterres that calls out to the world to support the climate refugees alongside the voices of climate activists from around the world and journalists reporting on food shortages, lack of shelter, and children's trauma at refugee sites with a performance of bada khayal in Raag Bhairav learned from the late-Gwalior Ustad Hammed Ali Khan Sahib and features Hemani on vocals, Mehdi Rezanian on Santur, and Ojas Joshi on tabla. The first part is a prayer to alleviate suffering and the second emphasizes the significance of service as an act of humanity and personal redemption. To listen to Displacement please click [here](#) or find Hemani's debut album: Mannat (a prayer, a wish) which is out on all digital platforms.*

It is May 2022. I was able to enter Canada after nearly two years of travel restrictions due to COVID-19.

Calgary is my new home and the territory of the Indigenous peoples of Treaty 7 and the Métis Nation of Alberta. I have fallen in love with the Bow river.

I see people rafting and kayaking every other day as I walk from the East village to Inglewood, where my first rental was.

Moving is never easy and I have had my own share of difficulties. I have witnessed many thunderstorms and even walked to my home during one. From June to August, I was located

further down the North East, a 30-minute bus ride from the LRT station and 16 minute walk from the bus stop to home. I have seen lightning crash behind me and heard thunder in my ears as I crossed roads, keeping my balance while walking through small puddles and avoiding deeper ones. But I tried to make it fun, singing, and getting soaked in the rain; I have enjoyed Calgary's thunders in the way that my people enjoy the monsoon.

But, alas, these monsoons in my country have drowned villages and even some small cities in Sindh. The kayaks and motorboats that we enjoy riding in Calgary are short in number in Sindh and are needed as rescue boats to save lives.

I call the paddle station to book a single kayak to take a ride across the river. It is August and I learn they have hundreds of single-person kayaks and many more to accommodate up to twelve passengers.

As I sit in Calgary watching news of a national emergency in Pakistan and hear the stories of the people stranded in houses that are drowning, I wonder if Pakistan could receive more boats could more people be rescued from drowning. I wonder: if we come together to donate food to rescued people going hungry would more lives survive.

Nearly a third of Pakistan is under water. Death tolls rise above a thousand each day; 33 million have been displaced and are in need of food and shelter. The UN announces that the disastrous floods in Pakistan are a warning for the world to "stop sleepwalking toward" climate change doom.

The earth is in crisis and people of the Sindh need your help. Sindh is home to the world's oldest Indus Valley civilization and the ruins of Mohenjodaro—a 5000-year-old city. The Sindhi people are embedded in rich cultures of oral poetry and music. We must not let these people and cultures drown.

**SHUMAILA HEMANI** (she/her) is an interdisciplinary artist and academic residing in Alberta, Canada. She holds a Ph.D. in Music and M.A. in Ethnomusicology from the University of Alberta and served as a Music Faculty for Semester at Sea (2020) and the Faculty of Extension (UoA). Her artistic practice involves sculpting with sounds of the environment and Islamic mystic poetry from South Asia for social empowerment and transformation. Her acousmatic composition, *Perils of Heavy Rainfall*, won the Second Prize in the Listening During Covid Contest (2020) and the New Forum magazine nominated her poem, *Living with Purpose* for the Alberta Magazine Awards in Poetry (2022). Hemani received the Cultural Diversity Award in Music and First Prize at the Society for Ethnomusicology for her performance and research in Sufi poetry. She is currently writing her monograph for Routledge's *Islam and Human Rights* series and is an Artist Resident at Trico Changemakers Studio, Mount Royal University in Calgary (2022-23).