

Sasha A. Khan

Letter-Poems to Shauki Masi

Diasporic Queer South Asian Muslim Reflections
on the Five Pillars of Islam

Abstract: An extension of an ongoing haunted queer diasporic kinship practice, this piece consists of letter-poems written to the author's ancestor, Shauki Masi, who passed away several years ago. In this way, the author offers queer Muslim meditations on the five pillars of Islam: salat (ritual of daily prayer), zakat (alms), sawm (ramzaan), hajj (pilgrimage), and shahadah (declaration of faith). The five pillars of Islam offer a praxis through which Muslims can (re)balance their relationships, communities, and therefore the world.

Opakwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008: 7) reminds us, "Relationships do not merely shape reality; they *are* reality." The five pillars offer Muslims an Islamic praxis through which we (re)balance our relationships, communities, and therefore, the world. I offer meditations on the five pillars of Islam through a haunted queer diasporic kinship practice that takes the form of letter-poems to an ancestor, Shauki Masi, my paternal grandmother's first cousin, who passed away in the spring of 2017.¹ In so doing, I craft my own "theory in the flesh," a story of resistance to interlocking systems of oppression grounded in my lived experiences as a diasporic queer and nonbinary, disabled and Mad, mixed-race South Asian Muslim femme (Moraga 2015: 19).

Salat: The Ritual of Daily Prayer

December 2018:

As Saalam Alaikum Shauki Masi²

Although I doubt you would identify as queer, you are an ancestor who paved the way for my queerness. We never spoke of it overtly, but I don't think we needed to. You knew what was in my heart.

When I was little, we would sit together, drinking limbu-pani & eating sandwiches. We spoke of³ Islam, pedagogy, Sufi poetry, & family. You wove stories in Urdu, Hindko, & English. Somehow, I always understood.

When I became sick, it was too painful for us to talk about. You saw the changes in my body, all too familiar, and knew. You held (and continue to hold) space for this part of me.

Last summer, more than a year after you left us, Daadi & M. Masi finally⁴ got together. While F. Masi slept upstairs, we sat at the dining room table. The air was heavy with your absence. Sipping milky chai, they told me a story.⁵

As a newlywed, things were a bit tight. You had to choose between paying for heating during an icy London winter or buying a pack of cigarettes. You picked the cigs, of course. We laughed, surrounded by Apa's plants, and I knew⁶ you were there, too.

I know you understand all too well the choices we make to survive.

I wish my Ev could have met you. You had a gift for seeing into hearts & souls that

I imagine has only been strengthened in afterlife.
I think, too, you would understand that
we build family the only ways we know how.

I always carry you (& your teachings) in my heart.

Khuda Hafiz,⁷

S.

Zakat: Alms

March 2019:

As Salaam Alaikum Shauki Masi,

I am writing to you after the Islamophobic
mass shooting in Aotearoa. I know that, like mine,
your heart is heavy with grief. I cried
when I learnt the first victim greeted the shooter,
“Hello, brother.”

I long to go home. It has been almost two years
in diaspora. Two years since I saw my grandparents,
smelled raat ki rani during the monsoon rains,⁸
& tasted home. It has been exactly two years
since you passed away.

Again, I long to go home. To hear the words,
As Salaam Alaikum, and to be at peace. Of course,
there is violence at home, too. There is no peace,
even in prayer.

Sometimes, it feels like I am drowning in a sea
of violence, trauma & grief. I try to make sense
of my part in these cycles of oppression. I know
Islam should guide me, ground me, give me peace,
but I don't know how to reach it anymore.

Two years ago, when I was last home, A. chacha⁹
became suspicious about my faith. He demanded
I recite the Shahadah, to assuage his doubts. I told him¹⁰

I considered myself Muslim, but he wouldn't be swayed.
I refused to say it. I couldn't say it.
It felt wrong to perform Muslimness when I didn't know
how to describe my relationship to Islam
anymore.

I may not have the right words, but I think of you:
Of how you encouraged me to cultivate
a personal understanding of Islam,
separate from others' expectations but
grounded in community responsibility.
Of how you modeled this by bridging
Sunni & Sufi traditions to craft
a beautiful and complex vision of Islam
as it was, as it is, and as it could be.

Kal, I promise to try.¹¹

Khuda Hafiz,
S.

Sawm: Ramzaan

June 2019:

As Salaam Alaikum Shauki Masi,

A few months after you passed away,
Ev & I were told pregnancy was ill-advised.
I was devastated, my grief augmented,
& we tried to make our peace.

When I told Daadi, she said simply:
"Kismet is kismet." We can only accept¹²
the path that Allah gives us.
The grief that she was unable to feel
in order to survive, widowed and pregnant
due to war, rests in my bones.

This reminds me of a story. Many years ago,
I wanted to leave home to study in diaspora.

I was only fifteen, and the khandaan appealed to you,¹³
as my elder, to intervene & talk sense into me.
You silenced everyone's objections with two words,
"Why not?"

In your words, I heard echoes
of Sufi Turkish poet Nesimi:

"The wine of this love is a sin, the orthodox think—
The sin is mine. I fill my glass and drink,
What of it?"¹⁴

It is through the Islam that you modeled
for me, that I learnt to submit
to the contradictions
& find peace.

A. chacha describes jihad¹⁵
as the everyday struggle
to become a better Muslim. In this,
I see a Muslim framework for kinship &
responsibility, one that reminds me of
Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's
question: "How do we become good ancestors?"¹⁶

Kal, I return to your example
to make sense of how we can end
the vortex of violence & oppression
so that we can all be free.

Khuda Hafiz,
S.

Hajj: Pilgrimage

October 2019:

As Salam Alaikum Shauki Masi,

Daddy & I
are both sick.

He has been sick
my entire life
& I have been sick
for almost a decade.

Doctors refer to
our autoimmune
illness as a
“death sentence.”

They offer a
reprieve
through treatment.
We are not so sure;
the root has always
been oppression.

Unlike the rest
of the khandaan,
I know
he means it
when he says he'd
prefer to die
than to be caught
in the maw
of the
monster.

We have lived
in the presence of death
for a long time.

We have
never spoken
of it,
save once.

It is only
one more
silence
that fills

the chasm
between
us.

I went to see him,
with & without Ev.
I always wondered
if I would try
to be there
for him (for me)
if this ever
came to pass.
It turns out,
once it happened,
there was no choice.

There is a line from a ghazal I wrote a year ago
running through my head:

I ask my father, over whiskey, how we survive.
He takes a drag, silence his only answer—what happened.

Neither of us knows how to survive.
Perhaps the difference between us
is that he wants to,
& I don't.

I wonder, Shauki Masi,
if you ever felt this way
too.
Khuda Hafiz,
S.

Shahadah: The Declaration of Faith

December 2019:

As Salam Alaikum Shauki Masi,

Within Islam, ghaflah¹⁷
is the sin of forgetting Allah
& one's own divine origins.

In a course that I took last fall,
Dr. Driskill said something that stuck:
s/he described QTPOC art as memory work
in the face of a “country [that] wants us to forget.”¹⁸

Systems of oppression
create the conditions for,
and are sustained by,
our forgetting.

White supremacy & anti-Muslim racism &
imperialism & (post)colonialism &
racialized casteism & heteropatriarchy
render unthinkable
queer & trans Muslimness.

These systems of oppression
produce the conditions for
ghaflah, those moments in which we,
as queer & trans Muslims,
as well as our larger communities
forget our shared divine origins & that
we all have a place in the Ummah.¹⁹

Kal, I try to remember.

Khuda Hafiz,
S.

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Notes

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Dominant and state languages have been key to colonial and postcolonial occupation projects in and beyond South Asia. While a description of the tensions between the languages that I use in this piece is beyond the scope of this piece, I offer minimal context and translations for Urdu-Hindi, Hindko, and Arabic words through the footnotes.

- 1 Masi (Hindko) means “maternal aunt.”
- 2 As Saalam Alaikum (Arabic) is a Muslim greeting that means “peace be upon you.”
- 3 Limbu-pani (Urdu-Hindi) means “lemonade.”
- 4 Daadi (Urdu-Hindi, Hindko) means “paternal grandmother.”
- 5 Chai (Urdu-Hindi, Hindko) means “tea.”
- 6 Apa (Urdu-Hindi, Hindko) is a title of respect for an older female relative, typically an older cousin or sister, though it can have wider applications.
- 7 Khuda Hafiz (Urdu-Hindi) means “God protect you” within a Muslim framework. For a discussion of the political connotations of this term versus Allah Hafiz (Arabic) in a Pakistani context, see Ali 2012.
- 8 Raat ki rani (Urdu-Hindi), queen of the night, means “jasmine.”
- 9 Chacha (Urdu-Hindi, Hindko) means “uncle” but is often used more expansively as a title of respect for older male relatives and family friends.
- 10 The Shahadah (Arabic) is the declaration of faith, one of the five pillars of Islam.
- 11 Kal (Urdu-Hindi) means “yesterday and tomorrow.”
- 12 Kismet (Urdu-Hindi) means “fate,” “destiny,” or one’s lot in life.
- 13 Khandaan (Urdu-Hindi) means “family.” I use it to refer to my father’s side of the family specifically.
- 14 Nesimi 2010.
- 15 One of the most misunderstood Islamic concepts, jihad (Arabic) means “struggle.”
- 16 Justice 2018: 28.
- 17 Ghafiah (Arabic) means “negligence” or “heedlessness.” Within an Islamic context, it refers to the sin of disregarding Allah and one’s own relationship and responsibilities to the divine. See Smith 2009.
- 18 Qwo-Li Driskill, personal class notes, QS 577: Queer/Trans People of Color Arts & Activisms, Oregon State University, October 3, 2018.
- 19 Ummah (Arabic) is the worldwide community of Muslims.

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