Trains to Nowhere: Movement, Mobility & the Mother(land) in *Moor* (2015)

By

Noor ul Ain

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Supervisor: Dr. Tamara El-Hoss

Second Reader: Dr. Gale Coskan Johnson

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1. **Introduction:**

In an opening montage of the 2015 Pakistani film titled *Moor* (dir. Jamshed Mahmood Raza or Jami)*,* a black and white silhouette of a *chaddar* fills the frame. This *chaddar* adorns a woman, who in the next shot, is seen leaving the room. She leaves behind a child who wistfully watches her departure. The montage cuts to a train running—a man stands on the other side of the tracks, and we see his disheveled face through the grills on the train windows. He looks to the right, as though expecting someone’s arrival. The relationship between these three characters, the woman, the man, the child, is not introduced at this moment but the roles they occupy within the film: abandoned sons, betrayed mothers and awaiting fathers, inform recurrent themes. *Moor’s* narrative builds around these arrivals and departures and the mechanics of the violence embedded in these processes. It seems that ‘movement’ is coded into the subtext of the film—whether through pan shots of the train tracks that meander from city to city or through the visa offices that mediate these departures. While the film is grounded in physical movement, there are also other kinds of departures: from morality, principles, and dignity.

In this paper, I contend that Jami’s *Moor* makes the argument that in Pakistan displacement is inherited from one generation to the next. Too often migration and displacement functions as a necessary conduit to economic sustenance, thus creating a proliferation of fractured families, much like the one in *Moor*, where a member must leave ‘home’ on the pretext of financial prosperity. This movement, I argue, is also predicated on class aspirations which carry with them the hope that this migration will create conditions for class mobility. Hence, I am understanding this film as a cultural product that is informed by the socio-politico-economic conditions in Pakistan. Through this analysis, I understand loss and separation in *Moor* to be passed on like a family heirloom and results in a form of exile that evades a dependable place of ‘home’.

To illustrate this argument, I examine the narratives of separation, movement, and class mobility within Jami’s *Moor*. I believe the film offers a terrain rich with the tension of leaving a land, kin, and culture, and migrating to a foreign one. Taking from this, an equivalent concern of the paper will also be to investigate *Moor*’s narrative of the relationship between displaced identities, nationalism, and land politics—and additionally, the complication of these ideas through the recurring instances of ambivalence and strange vacillations within the film. These explorations also raise questions such as, can there be a stable ‘homebase’ for the forever displaced? What is the cost of betrayal to the mother/land in *Moor*? Who is able to practice this movement within a family and who embodies fixity? And lastly, if personhood is understood through spatial and cultural configurations, how is identity formation informed by displacement and dislocations?

1. **Arrivals and Departures:**

The word *Moor* is from Pashto, a language largely spoken in the northern districts of Pakistan and translates to Mother. This film is decidedly about mothers. But this ‘motherhood’ is not only predicated on familial relations, rather it also extends to ideas of nationhood, land relations and moral quandaries. At the heart of the film is a separation from these many ‘mothers’. They act as totems that form networks of relationality between the different characters of the film. These different characters wish to protect these mothers; however, they betray or kill these mothers, but nonetheless work to resurrect them through what would be considered dignified and morally upright acts.

This film starts with the death of a mother—the matriarch of a family based in Khost, a small village in the Balochistan province in Pakistan. In flashbacks it is revealed that Palwasha is the reason her son, Ehsaanullah Khan, the protagonist, moves from Khost to the bustling megacity of Karachi, in the Sindh province. Ehsaanuallah hopes to make a life for himself when their village has no viable options for young men. However, we find that city life is fraught with fraud and moral conflicts as Ehsanuallah goes into the business of making counterfeit documents to facilitate illegal migrations out of Pakistan[[1]](#footnote-1). However, this is not the only way the migratory process is codified in the fabric of the story: from the opening shot to the last, the film is structured around the movement (or lack thereof) of trains. It builds its narrative around these arrivals and departures. The father, Wahid, in this fractured family is a station master in Khost—a rundown station that only lives on in the fading memories of the glory days of the Pakistani Railway Industry[[2]](#footnote-2). This station also functions as a battle ground for several groups who are trying to seize the land and use it for their own nefarious means: that is, sell the metal from the train tracks and use the money to start their own businesses. One of these characters is also Wahid’s older brother, Zahir, who has joined forces with owners (namely, Lalu) of newer bus services (that have started at the expense of the dying trains) and hopes to profit off the land deal with Wahid. Wahid must choose between building a more comfortable life for Palwasha and himself or continuing to live destitute and impoverished. One choice implies killing the mother(land) but the other, may just save the mother (and her family) from abject poverty.

Ehasanullah Khan is also stuck in a similar predicament. While he was compelled to migrate from Khost to Karachi by Palwasha, he has now embraced the spirit of this displacement. He no longer feels at home in Khost but is unable to build a real home in Karachi. He stands frozen in the limbo between arriving and departing. Ehsaanuallah has spent so many years trying to ‘make it’ in the big city—to bend, twist and fit the mold of a city dweller— but the only business he has ever excelled in is that of ‘fraud’. He is an imposter, but then, Jami seems to imply that most people in Karachi are such[[3]](#footnote-3). The movement between Khost, in the Balochistan province of Pakistan to Karachi, in the Sindh province mimics the routes on which his counterfeit business sends his clients: from the perils of the motherland to the promise of a foreign land. In fact, the question of Baloch nationalism often stands as separate from Pakistani nationalism[[4]](#footnote-4). Separatist elements have propelled the province to function as autonomous from the state and are partly catalyzed by “the social organisation of the province (that is) based on tribalism” (Khan, 282). Hence, the concept of state authority does not figure very prominently in “the tribal mode of localized social life—whatever pockets of power and control exist are based on the internal organization of local tribes” (282).

But more importantly, this conceptualization leads Baloch ethnic identity to stand as separate from the Pakistani nationalist identity. Hence, departure from Balochistan and the staunch sense of betrayal for abandoning it is even more pronounced than leaving Pakistan itself. Jami in *Moor* attempts to make a case for both these departures and the violence encoded in them. But what binds both these departures together in their poignancy, is also the particularity of the relationship Balochistan holds with the rest of Pakistan and in particular, the Sindh and Punjab provinces. This relationship operates through much of the same mechanics as the neoliberal global enterprises do in the world: in that they are exploitative forces that practice a sort of colonial control over Baloch resources, labor, and land. Hence, an argument can be made that this intercity migration can be seen as a microcosm for the larger migratory journeys that are happening on the periphery of the film’s narrative, but also currently in the socio-political milieu of Pakistan. This contextual frame matters to my analysis because it suggests the ubiquitous nature of this ‘inherited displacement’ in *Moor* arguably also informs all movements within and outside of Pakistan. The film’s continual reference to Baloch regionalism is also better understood in this context, as well as *Moor*’s oscillation between the love for the land of Pakistan, but simultaneously also Balochistan. This ambivalence is further explored in the following section.

1. **“Homeward Bound”: Of Home & Remembrance**

Wahid and Baggoo (also a station master, Wahid’s friend, and a loyal compatriot) sit on a ledge that overlooks the vast expanse of a frozen, hard Baloch land. This is their home. Wahid wonders out loud with Baggoo, *how much money will he be willing to sell his home for?* But Baggoo’s allegiance to the stations and to this home is somewhat primordial: he remembers a ‘golden age’ where the trains still transported people and the Pakistan Railway was central to the national identity. He says,

*Jab Pakistan bana— humara sub kuch lout gaya— humara train mei aik insaan bhi nai bacha. Sirf hum bacha. Hum socha,koe baat tou hai* (When Pakistan was made—I lost everything—not one person survived on the train [coming from India] that I was on. Only I survived. I thought, there must be some purpose/ reason to it) (1:16).

This profound revelation from Baggoo is a sporadic occurrence in the film—he is arguably presented by Jami as a ‘Shakespearean fool’. His wisdom comes in small spurts centered either around nationalistic fervor for the land or mediations on allegiance to the family. Yet, he is the same character who also offers comedic relief through the film: his childlike purity makes him ‘crazy’ enough to spit in the antagonist, Lalu’s tea out of anger in one scene and race his ostentatious SUV in another (which conspicuously flashes a Sindh number plate). Baggoo is both wise and frivolous, depending on the situation. He is both “*pagal*/ crazy” (as Wahid laughingly calls him) and dependable if a situation calls for it. In the scene in question, while poignant music swells in the background, Baggoo proclaims a nationalistic devotion to the trains that implies a marriage to the stations or as Baggoo puts it: “Humari shaadi Allah pak nay train say kera diya” (As God willed it, I am now married to these trains”, 1:21:55).

Perhaps, his reverence for the train stations and to the land they are built on is also a kind of madness and a kind of purity—especially in the context of what Baggoo is referring to. Baggoo, in this scene, is alluding to the partition of India and Pakistan that was shepherded by the trains, a “colonial gift”, that carried citizens of the nascent states across fresh borders. Jisha Menon in *The Performance of Nationalism* notes, that at least 500,000 people were massacred on these trains (8). These borders had been created hastily, in a shocking six-month period, as the British colonial empire exited the subcontinent in 1947. They created illusionary homes and arbitrary borders that displaced around 15 million people. But according to Menon the displacement or the “massive dislocation” within the subcontinent “was set into motion as soon as rumors about the partition of India along religious lines began to circulate” (33). People began to move, without having a clear destination in mind, without knowing if they will eventually belong to India or Pakistan. This violently attained freedom was a shattering experience for the survivors (34). However, it seems that for Baggoo (in all his sporadic wisdom), the bloody legacy of the partition and the trains is secondary to what they made exist: a “home” that promised freedom of religious practice and mobility. It also promised a secular, democratic state that, in a famous speech by the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, would ensure all personal, social, and religious beliefs of the citizens were not the “business of the state” (Presidential Address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, 11th August 1947). If this was the home that was promised, then the one in *Moor* is a far more troubled space. Baggoo holds on to the ‘golden’ memory of a home, that as Gyatri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires* puts it has been created through the experience of displacement which “gives rise to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins,’ to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (3). Hence, Baggoo’s home seems to be predicated on a remembrance—"an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history”—that does not quite fit the reality of his current home (3). The homes that Jami built in *Moor* are unable to stand on a stable base because they are borne off the greatest displacement—the partition.

*Moor* has many homes within it: ones that sprawl across Khost, Balochistan to Karachi, Sindh, and are built on similarly precarious foundations. Ehsaanuallah’s home in Balochistan is fraught with a need for departure. Jami films this home in all its rugged beauty: the towering mountains cradle a vast plain that has a few scattered houses across its expanse. It is largely abandoned—and within the few houses that still exist, Jami shows shabby interiors, scarce, disintegrating furniture and dusty, forgotten heirlooms. This is the home about which Wahid, when confronted with the question of who must stay to take care of him after Palwasha’s death, decidedly notes, “*Sub ka jaana zaroori hai”* (“Everyone must leave”, 00:40:50). Ironically, the same principle does not apply to him. Wahid encapsulates a certain fixity—he has a lack of movement embedded in his relationship with his current home. He refuses to abandon it or move away from it. His predicament around selling it might also partly arise from this fixity. Even after he tells everyone to leave, Wahid pointedly looks to Ehsanuallah and says, “Appna tou kuch kerta nai hai— ghair [Baggoo] ko bulta hai rukh jao” (My own flesh and blood won’t do a thing but tells a stranger [Baggoo] to stay, 00:41:35). Similarly, in flashbacks of the time when Ehsanuallah first left, Wahid adamantly resists his migration but is chastised by Palwasha who says, “Bula tha na tumko—niklo idher say… Ehsaan ka jeena zaroori hai” (I had implored you before—that we must leave here… Now Ehsaan must get to live, 00:45:33). Hence it seems that Wahid does not only resist this movement for himself but also for his son. Ehsanullah’s migration to Karachi does not carry the same urgency for Wahid as it does for Palwasha who sees the decay around them and wants her progeny to escape it. But even Wahid, with his seemingly rooted relationship to the Baloch land, is forced to *temporarily* leave in order to locate his son in Karachi by the end of the film. For most of the characters of *Moor*, departing from home, much like Edward Said notes in *Out of Place* is an act they must do again and again—almost as though they are always in exile (299).

In a situation as such, the place of home and the notion of belonging are both highly contested ideas. Sara Ahmed in her essay “Home and Away”, complicates the notion of what is defined as home and argues against its assumed fixity. She considers homes as “complex and contingent spaces of inhabitance” in which the very forming of homes is informed by “movements and dislocations” (12). It seems then that the making of homes by immigrants or the families of immigrants’ rests on no stable base, rather on consistent movements and moments of “pain”. Her work is pivotal to the understanding of the “fetish” of home that evades a destination (331). In this case then, the process of migration and the journeys one takes become more like home than the spaces one inhabits. Additionally, Baggoo’s creation of a home through memory/ remembrance also extends to Ahmed’s idea that in the “writing of the history of a nation” and the project of “assigning (oneself) a place in a forgotten past” the work of collective memory is crucial (330). In the remembering of a ‘home’, Baggoo also creates a collective ‘We’. ‘We’—the nation, the people, and the community—who perform collective acts of storytelling about remembering a certain past and what has been lost in this past.

Wahid and Baggoo seem to be the patrons of this remembered past; this collective ‘We’. A history that also explains why the love for nation and land is so pivotal to their characters and why Wahid, and as an extension Baggoo, compound a sort of rootedness to the land. How are they at once rooted and adrift? How are they displaced if they never want to leave? It can be argued that the paradoxical nature of this phenomenon occurs through the “experience of leaving home in migration” that both Baggoo and Wahid embody (343). The experience of displacement is so quintessential to their existence that, taking from Sara Ahmed, they yearn “to return to a place that was (once) lived as home”— one that exists in their collective memory. Their displacement is also embodied through the “failure of (their) memory to fully make sense of the place (they’ve) come to inhabit— a failure which is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body which feels out of place…” (343). Hence, the exile that Baggoo and Wahid once experienced has continued to displace them even now. John Durham Peter in *Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora*, defines that exile, whether voluntary or involuntary, suggests “a painful or punitive banishment from one’s homeland” (19). It relates to the fantasy of a “glorious return” to a home that is no longer safe or habitable (19). Exile, hence, is invariably linked to nationalism. It concocts an image of an “original” home and a national land that inspires longing for return not just to the land but also to a “primordial identity” (31). Hence exile, whether voluntary or involuntary, implies an inherently violent process: it suggests trauma, imminent danger, and a need to relocate because the conditions at home make it inhabitable. In the very act of looking back, exile conjures up something new and inventive: the nostalgia of a home that once was.

In *Moor*, this argument also extends to a sort of fabled ‘integrity’ of the old days, that suggests that the glorious home that Baggoo and Wahid hold in their memory, was built on a set of life choices that are no longer valid or sustainable. They therefore resist the erasure of that past. The current home, for example, that the estranged son Ehsaanuallah leaves is so infertile that he claims: “*Kiya kaam hai yahan? Sub kuch tou khatam ho gaya hai*” (“What work is even left to do here? Everything is finished, there is nothing left”, 00:42:00). As these anxieties are built through the dialogue of the film, the visuals pan over the expanse of the land in Khost—hard, frozen, unkempt and poverty stricken. Karachi is a striking contrast to this. It’s a teeming metropolis, which the film asserts continually, is rotting at its center. Where the ‘memories’ of the bygone train stations in Khost cradle blooming love stories and vestiges of youth, Karachi is a different beast. It is continually portrayed as the epitome of corruption and vice but simultaneously, represents unbounded opportunity. This, expectedly, is the place where Ehsaanuallah starts his counterfeit business. When admonished by a friend/ love interest for this ‘fraud’, he responds, “*Amber tumhay koe andaza hai meinay kya kya kiya hoa hai is shehr mei kuch banay k liyea?*” (Amber, do you have any idea the things I have had to do to make it in this city? 01:22:00).

Karachi is continually portrayed as the prodigious villain—the counterpart to Khost[[5]](#footnote-5). But this suggested binary is rent with contradictions: if Karachi is the home that corrupts individuals, Khost is the home that pushes these individuals to make these treacherous journeys at the first place. Khost, as Zahir puts it, is the home that one is propelled to leave because of a suggested lack of opportunities for work or social mobility. He says, “*Humay koe nai puchta… Koun aata hai idher?*” (Nobody even cares about us… Who even comes here?”, 00:37:48). The image of Khost as a desolate, abandoned home is juxtaposed to the teeming Karachi, a home that offers the opportunity and mobility that Khost lacks but at a cost that is often too high. Ehsaanuallah notes, “*Karachi k tou aur hi maslay hain— sub paisay k peechay lagay hoay hain*” (Karachi has its own problems… Everyone is running after money”, 00:43:00). Similarly, Lalarukh, a supporting character’s only real contribution to the plot is her admonishing the ‘tough’ life that the city offers, when she says, “*Karachi mei tou itni tension rehti hai… wahan koe kyu hi rahay ga?*” (“Life in Karachi is so stressful… why would anyone choose to live there?”, 00:27:36).

It seems then that the homes we leave and the ones we wish to inhabit are equally ‘unhomely’. Hence, it seems that for migrants, there is something inherently unattainable about the stability and security that the word ‘home’ suggests. In Christian Ross’s book *Art for Coexistence* (2022), Ross contends with the issue of ‘necropolitics’ as it relates to refugees and illegal migrants. In her chapter “The Endangering, Hampering, And Criminalization of Migration”, she notes that the existence of the migratory beings within the neoliberal capitalist structures that govern their movement is that of “always-imminent death” (29). Rather than actively killing them, bureaucratic institutional systems ensure they are always in the “presence of death” (29). This creates a situation where the migrant is forced to live in a permanent condition of “being in pain” (28). They have not just lost their homes in the migratory process but also their political and bodily rights. So, while they flee political strife, suffering, or endangerment, they are “reiteratedly subjected to violence throughout their journeys” and that violence is sustained and practiced by the “state authorities of the countries of their destination” (33). Of course, Ross’s argument largely applies to migrations between countries and tends to overlook the nuances of an intercity migration.

Yet, quite similarly in *Moor*, the ubiquitous presence of violence is codified in all movements that Jami films. The very nature of migration within the film reflects the movement between the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world that Ross refers to. It reflects the sort of organization of class, society and culture that creates a hierarchy where Karachi “is home to some but not Others” (Sharma, 7). This divide is realized through similar metrics as well: an unjust division of wealth where one country/ province/ people have access to a sort of mobility that others cannot imagine. For the migrants making these journeys between equally unwelcoming homes, the necessity of movement is the only constant. It can be argued then that the condition of the working class in the film is such that it must willingly reconfigure its moral compass and displace itself continually in the hopes of a better life. Dreams of upward mobility only come at the behest of a movement away from their literal and metaphoric ‘mothers’.

This condition of perpetual displacement is also reminiscent of Veena Das, Margaret Lock and Arthur Klienman’s work on *Social Suffering* which offers an important insight into the dual affliction of migrants. At once, migrants escape hopeless conditions in their home country to reach a place where they are in many cases met with “indifference” or even worse, aggression by the host cultures. This traps them in a process of alienation that encapsulates their “political present” matching with the trauma of their “imagined past” (13). This “double alienation” cuts across classed or gendered differences, where the treatment of migrants as second grade citizens becomes a homogenous experience. At the heart of this process, necessarily, is the fractured family— with members either attempting to leave or have already left the place they call ‘home’. In *Moor*, Jami’s treatment of these bodies in transit as both inherently displaced and permanently stuck in the limbo between many ‘homes’ is crucial to my understanding of the nature of migrancy and migrant bodies within Pakistan.

1. **“Tracks and Tribe-ulations”: Of Land & Nationalism**

The question of home also beckons attention to the land that fosters these homes. While the creation and imagining of ‘homes’ is a largely nostalgic practice in *Moor*, the presence of land politics and nationalist fervor is a more concrete theme. The relationship of the nation state to both the family and the home is interwoven to a point that through the (possible) selling of the land, Wahid enacts several betrayals. Firstly, to the nation that the trains belong to, secondly, to the Baloch people who believe it to be a matter of *izaat* or dignity for the train stations to keep functioning and lastly, to his family which appears to be an amalgam of both these institutions. In *Moor*, as the tension between the land-protectors and the land-grabbers mounts, it is revealed in flashbacks that a major strife between Palwasha and Wahid that allegedly led to her “broken heart syndrome” and eventual death was that Wahid at a point was seriously considering selling the land of the Khost station. She implores Wahid in a scene, “*Yeh zameen tou humara Ma hai. Tum humari Ma ko bhej dey ga?* (This land is my mother. You are willing to sell my mother?” 00:51:33)[[6]](#footnote-6).

This correlation between home as an organizing force for ideas of land, family, ethnicity, and nation is a recurring phenomenon not just through the narrative of the film, but Nandita Sharma in *Home Economics* argues, is “one of the most naturalized of concepts” in modern times (7). With this conflation of family, home, and nation in particular, the creation of borders, which dictate who belongs within the peripheries and who without, is an expected by-product. These borders, according to Sharma, lead to an “overlaying of the idea of home onto that of the nation” leading to migrant workers being “easily understood as foreigners laboring within a foreign labor market” (7). The ties between family, land and the nation state are also further elaborated by the argument that the referral to nations as “motherland” and “fatherland” means that these foreigners must adapt to a “national family” once they migrate (8). In the same way, within the territory of ‘our home’ that is, the nation state, the people of the ‘national family’ are marked by “common character, much like the members of a (nuclear) family” (8). Jami’s delineation of the inter-province migration in *Moor* sets a similar pattern: Ehsaanuallah’s struggle to assimilate in Sindh comes from the existence of an exclusionary politics that makes ‘money’ the only fulcrum of social organization within the city. The directives of the ‘family’ structure within Karachi dictate that the need to ‘make it’ takes precedence over the means through which it is achieved. As a member of the notorious land mafia puts it: “*Paisay paisay hai, haram ho ya halaal*” (“Money is money, whether earned through corrupt or honest means”, 00:49:06).

Interestingly, however, in *Moor*, as mentioned in the section of *Home*, there is an inability to conjure up a place of real belonging. Hence, it mostly exists in Baggoo and Wahid’s imagining of a primordial rootedness. But for Ehsanullah, he is neither at home in Khost, nor Karachi. Sharma notes that having a “home within a nation… is not a geographical signpost but an ideological signifier” (8). Loyalty to the land and protection of one’s ‘home’ then seems to be a practice based on an ideological allegiance to a land and a people. In *Moor*, with the proliferation of these ‘home-spaces’ and the split allegiances to the Baloch land/ people versus to the nation state of Pakistan, Jami offers another complication: which land/ nation must be protected? To which land is one’s allegiance? Jami’s characters oscillate between nationalism and regionalism in the narrative of *Moor*. There is a binary opposition between loyalty to the land of Pakistan versus that of Balochistan, as though they stand as two separate nations. However, even this relationship encapsulates ambivalence in the way it plays out in the film, highlighted through each character’s conception of the notion of patriotism. Lalu, the primary antagonist of the film, had started off in a socially disadvantaged position like the rest of the residents of Khost village but has recently risen in status: he has made a living out of buying the land on which the train stations are located and selling the metal from the tracks[[7]](#footnote-7). Much to Wahid’s chagrin, his older brother Zahir is colluding with Lalu. Zahir is appointed with the job of persuading Wahid to sell the station he has been tasked with the preservation of. Seeing Wahid’s reluctance and moral quandary, he says,

*Yeh watan say muhabbat, pyaar waar… bulnay mein tou buhat acha lagta hai. Magar milta kuch nai. Yeh bara log hum logoun ko pagal banata hai, sub maal kha jaata hai. Hum koe ghalat kaam nai ker rahay (*This love for the nation... is only great to talk about, but you get nothing in return. These rich, powerful people gobble up everything and leave us nothing. We are doing nothing wrong here) (1:10:36).

Seeing the conditions in which the characters live in Khost, one is compelled to agree with Zahir. Wahid and Palwasha live in abject poverty. The station that is a source of their livelihood is no longer functional and its keepers are left to scramble to find ways to make a living. These conditions can be assumed to have been borne out of the state’s blatant neglect of the Baloch land and its people. Additionally, the film opens with graphics of the map of Pakistan, accompanied with text that states that the legacy of the trains has been ‘inherited’ from the British Empire. Hence, arguably the state has inherited not just the trains but also the land on which they stand, as a colonial legacy. The ‘taking back’ of these trains, tracks and stations can perhaps even be understood as a process of reclamation by the tribal veterans. This further complicates the positionality of Lalu and Zahir as ubiquitously ‘evil’ and worthy of contempt by the audience of *Moor.* Yet, they continue to be presented as the primary antagonists in the film. This ambivalence and vacillation colors most foundational conceptions in Moor: like the Baloch land being simultaneously desecrated (through the corrupt land mafia) and dignified (through the unwavering love that Baggoo and other tribal elders have for it). Similarly, nationalist attachment to Pakistan is realized through the elevation of the state as the problem-solver/ savior towards the end of the film while simultaneously being regarded as neglectful and corrupt in several other instances, like in Zahir’s impassioned speech or for example, a government official rebuking state institutions by saying to Wahid, “App yakeen nahi kerain gey is mulk ka kiya haal hai” (“You won’t believe the condition this country is in, 1:42:00”).

The elusive dichotomy between nationalism and regionalism in *Moor* is also realized through the way the urban space of Karachi is portrayed as exploitative, fast-paced and the ‘modern’ counterpart to the traditional, difficult but noble life in Khost. Leela Gandhi’s conception of nationalism in the chapter *Imagining Community: the Question of Nationalism* sheds light on the ambivalence of this situation. She notes that some nationalisms, in the ‘Western’ theoretical imagining, are “good” and “progressive” while others are “bad” and “reactionary” (103). A binary that decidedly sets Western nationalistic politics against the ‘separatist’ postcolonial sentiments. She notes that, according to Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson, “nationalism is the only form of political organization which is appropriate to the social and intellectual condition of the modern world” (104). This means that the more complex and involved the social organization of an urban space becomes, the more the need for a homogenizing force that gives direction to its community and workforce. The individual, ultimately, becomes one with the nation. Referencing Anderson, Gandhi notes that the nation is then a product of a radically “secular and modern imagination”, much like the conception of Karachi in *Moor* (104). However, a contradiction is central to this argument too: while the “Western” concept of nationality celebrates its progressiveness, it is also “paradoxically, postulated as the catalyst for ‘pre-modern’ or ‘atavistic’ sentiments” (106). Like a “two-faced Roman god Janus”, the rhetoric of national development is a forward-looking project while simultaneously, national attachment invokes the “latent energies of custom and tradition” (106). In *Moor*, then, it can perhaps be argued that this distinctly paradoxical nature of nationalism is realized through a division between Karachi as one face of nationalism and Khost as the other. The ambivalence between the love of nation, love of state and love of place plays out in Moor in the way that the sentimentality of nationalism gets contained in one sector, i.e. Khost, while Karachi becomes the playground for the modern, progressive aspirations of nationalism. This proposed binary too, of course, is riddled with the contradictions that are characteristic of the film. The ‘progress’ of Karachi is continually undercut by the fact that the urgency to leave Karachi (by characters like Asghar) is just as palpable as it is in Khost. And the betrayal of this departure is just as emotionally taxing as the one from abandoning Khost.

This division also gives way to the division of communities within Pakistan, as previously referenced in this section. Different communities conform to different national families and hold allegiance to a separate ‘motherland’. Interestingly, the only experience that remains common between these communities is a need to depart from their respective lands—implying that both these homes are equally unsustainable and unhomely. The movement of departing from Balochistan to Sindh is also mimicked by the movement away from Sindh to the next probable land (one that would require a fake passport) which, one can assume, is an equally troubled home. Additionally, encoded within this process of departure is unrelenting violence. It seems that the cost of even an ‘assumed’ betrayal to the land is that of a death sentence. Palwasha’s death, as previously mentioned, happens from a “broken-heart syndrome”—a condition that is symptomatic of high levels of stress and anxiety. With the ‘probable’ betrayal of Wahid to his land, Palwasha pays the price through a ‘sentimental’ collapse. Consistent with the argument, she first experiences an emotional breakdown while defending the ‘traditional’ nationalism in Khost, which eventually leads to her physical death. In her will, she leaves for Ehsaanuallah and her daughter beautifully wrapped copies of the Quran, as a final reminder, perhaps, of the moral code she lived by. One that conflated her devotion to her god, with that to her land and finally, that to her family. This argument, however, highlights another odd contradiction within the film: Jami briefly shows Palwasha as a young woman in the film—she is full of unbridled joy, energy, and life. She rides behind Wahid on a bicycle and tells him to “Go faster!” as they whiz through the once lively station, bustling with trains and people. The life she lives now is a complete contrast from the one she is shown to live as a young woman. There is something like resignation in the way Palwasha now lives her life. Yet, even though she recognizes Khost as a land that has withered just as she as (hence, her decision to send Ehsanuallah to Karachi)—she still vehemently opposes its barter. Perhaps then, as previously noted in this paper, Palwasha identifies with the land of Khost in a way that the mother becomes synonymous with the motherland. Hence, despite the lack of fecundity that the mother/land now holds, it still resists an erasure that may be motivated by the sentimentality of the nationalist rhetoric in Khost.

In Karachi, the death that causes another tectonic shift in Ehsaanuallah’s life and business is that of Asghar. The film introduces Asghar in one of the opening scenes during a visa interview for the United States. Despite having his visa approved, Asghar feels the moral weight of his deception (a morality decidedly motivated by religious sentiment, as is often the case in *Moor*) and he confesses that his documents are counterfeit. As the film proceeds, Asghar is positioned as an emblem for the black sheep of the ‘national family’ of Karachi; he has failed to follow the script that the ‘progressive’ nationalism has given to its members. Expectedly then, Asghar’s death, for his *almost* betrayal (of leaving Karachi), is beckoned by his financial ruin—he begs Ehsaanuallah for money after being drained by the exorbitant costs of the visa documents but is denied help. As he takes his own life, he leaves Ehsaanuallah, and metonymically the viewers of *Moor*, a finale platitude: “*Meray Abu humesha kehtay thay, chahay jaan chali jaye, jhoot mat bolna*” (“My father always used to tell me, even if it costs you your life, always tell the truth”, 1:31:00). On the wall behind him, as he tells his mother not to cry for him, is an overwhelming imagery of Quranic verses and calligraphy[[8]](#footnote-8). This moment is also important because it introduces yet another contradiction within the narrative of Moor. When Asghar first confesses to the visa officer that his documents are counterfeit he says, “Ma’am, my father told me to lie about all this. All my degrees are fake” (00:01:58). The paternal advice shifts entirely from the visa interview to Asghar’s swan song. While possibly an error in Jami’s writing, it may also suggest the place of fathers and fatherhood within in the film. The withering mothers protect and guide while the fathers stand central to the construction of this artifice. One wonders then, can the fathers in *Moor* ever be trusted to protect, to shepherd and to be conscientious?

Returning to the topic of Palwasha and Asghar, arguably, what makes them ‘friends in death’ is that their death comes at the cost of their devotion to their motherland, to their family and discernably, to their god. However, consistent with their nationalisms, Palwasha’s death first comes from an emotional collapse and Asghar from financial ruin. They are testament to the notion that the nature of leaving in *Moor* is ultimately a process of violent betrayal, yet simultaneously, as posited in the section of *Home*, a necessity for the migrants. Hence, a closer inspection of this idea introduces a chief anxiety that imbues the film: sons must leave their mother/land to “progress” but this progress doubles as a sort of betrayal that can only be remedied through the saving of this mother/land through a retreating towards traditional ideas of national devotion.

1. ***“Moor/ Baba/ Khandaan”*: Of Mother/ Father/ Family**

Palwasha knew she was dying. She had written a will for her children and divided up heirlooms between them before her death. One of the last things she said to Wahid, that he thinks of in moments of moral perplexity, was, “*Waada kero humsay… khandaan ko bachanay ka wadaa*” (Make me a promise… a promise to save our family”, 1:36:00). In the context of the previous section, however, a question arises: does the family just mean the nuclear unit, or is it synecdochal for the land and the nation, as well? Especially considering that deliberations on the nature of ‘family’ are central to the discussions of nationhood and motherlands in the film. What is equally important to understand, however, is that the experience of citizenship within a nation and membership within a family is a deeply gendered process. In *Moor*, families are often set up in a cyclical manner, i.e. the nature of femininity, in particular, seems to be mimicked through generations. If this paper argues for a generational inheritance of loss and displacement in Pakistan, then an investigation is also necessary of the process through which it is passed down from mothers and fathers onto their children. The *khandaan*/ family, hence, becomes the first indicator of an inherited displacement: it is visible through the existence of a ‘fractured’ family. And if the nation, by the tenets of the nationalistic discourses previously discussed, imagines itself as a family then this crisis of kinship allows an inspection into the larger crisis of displacement within the country.

In the case of *Moor*, two families are primarily the focal point of the film’s narrative. The current one, which features Palwasha, Wahid, Sarah and Ehsanullah and the one that is introduced through flashbacks, which is Wahid, Zahir, and their parent’s nuclear family. In the context of the current family, Ehsanullah’s departure could be seen as the primary point of rupture; Palwasha and Wahid are shown, with deep sorrow, sending a young Ehsaanuallah to Karachi. As he leaves on the train, Palwasha falls to her knees wailing—she orchestrated this separation because it is the only way she could imagine social and financial mobility for her son. On the day of her death, while the focus is on Ehsanullah travelling back to Khost, there is also the quiet return of Sarah, who has also seemingly travelled from elsewhere to attend the funeral. However, she is accompanied by her husband and hence, the film states a culturally grounded reality about the gendered experience of leaving: all women are bound to depart from their family homes by the tenets of patrilocality. This movement is such a regular occurrence in the patriarchal social and familial structures of Pakistan that the film does not even need to acknowledge its praxis. Women leaving their family homes to relocate and readjust to a new family, home and often, new land is a generationally repeated practice. But the way Ehsaanuallah and Sarah’s departure are treated on screen are vastly different; a practice that is also reflective of the treatment of women generally in the film.

In a few scenes from Palwasha and Zahid’s youth, Jami films their blooming romance beckoned by the ‘glory days’ of the trains. As the trains and train stations are in the pinnacle of their splendor, so are the couple. But there is a sudden throttling of their passions and youthful exuberance by Zahir who arrives unexpectedly to remind them of custom and culture and propriety. Palwasha is shown quickly pulling a *chaddar* over her head—a final surrender to the forces that return to crush her spirit and her heart later in the film. It is also fitting, then, that the introduction to a ‘mother’ in the first scene of the film is in a *chaddar[[9]](#footnote-9)*. Zahir, the henchmen of these forces of orthodoxy, has always been an upholder of such institutions. As a child, Jami shows him defend their stepmother who Wahid suspects has something to do with the death of their biological mother. He is correct to assert that the stepmother did not directly kill their biological mother, but Jami implies that she did herald the circumstances around the mother’s death. Zahir and Wahid’s father has remarried and left their biological mother in a state of such dissolution that she seemingly takes her own life by walking onto a train track. Perhaps, hence, it can be argued that the older family is equally as fractured as the current one. The mothers, like Sarah, are similarly displaced and the father, in this dysfunctional family, also enacts a key betrayal: if not to the land, then to the sanctity of marriage and the traditional family unit. However, it is implied that the blame for this transgression is split between Zahid’s father and the new wife/ stepmother whose positionality as a ‘bad woman’ factors into the equation of dysfunctionality.

*Moor* makes this distinction between bad, corrupting women and good, nurturing women continuously. Palwasha, a name that translates to “a ray of light” in Urdu, is positioned as one of the guiding lights in Wahid’s life. Amber in Karachi, similarly, appears quite serendipitously every time Ehsaanuallah needs to be reminded of his ethical responsibilities. Much like her name, which translates to the “sky”, her omnipresence is quite often the reason Ehsanullah is disrupted from making a poor moral decision. Very little is said about Amber’s job, but she is shown sitting in a cubicle in an office, suggesting a mundane desk job that does not invite moral scrutiny. Her character is diametrically opposed to that of Arzo, who works in the entertainment industry (a career conceived to be one of depravation and infamy in parochial social settings) and is joining Ehsaanuallah’s counterfeit business. Jisha Menon in *The Performance of Nationalism* (2013) locates the position of the “public woman” as a mother-goddess in South Asian cinema—meaning that her presence in public is ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ and as a result completely asexual, acutely professional, and exceedingly, caring, and generous, i.e., motherly (59). Amber falls into this category of this ‘public woman’ as defined by Menon, whose very presence in scenes is marked by heavily moralistic undertones and a need to correct, guide, and protect. Amber and Arzo also come face to face in a climactic scene where Arzo is disrespectful towards Wahid, telling him to ‘Get Lost’ while Amber is there to help fix the familial bond between Wahid and Ehsaanuallah. Arzo stomps out of the room, screaming expletives in English[[10]](#footnote-10), in her skimpy blouse, jeans and heels—contrasted by the ‘Eastern’ simplicity of Amber in her *shalwar, kameez* and *duppatta*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Leela Gandhi in the chapter *Postcolonialism and Feminism* proposes a distinction in nationalist discourses between Western women (or the colloquially branded, imperialist ‘memsahib’) and the Indian woman. Gandhi notes a certain “nationalist possessiveness” about the ‘native’ women that insists on a ‘protection’ of their indigeneity (95). She notes that according to this farcical nationalist discourse, the emancipation of the Indian woman must be “couched in an indigenous idiom” (95). That is, the imitation and copying of “Western women” is understood to be a sort of nationalistic betrayal: “What is often termed in the West as the emancipation of women, is only a glorified name for the disintegration of the family” (96). Gyatri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires* (2005) also illustrates this binary through an observation made by Tejaswini Niranjana on anticolonial nationalists in India in the early twentieth century that “used the figure of the amoral, sexually impure woman abroad as a way of producing the chaste, virtuous Indian woman at ‘‘home’’ as emblematic of a new ‘‘nationalist morality” (9). Arzo seems to noticeably mimic a ‘memsahib’: she meets Ehsanullah at a loud, tawdry party and has visibly strayed from the social conventions of modesty in the way she dresses or the career she practices. Wahid and Zahid’s stepmother in Khost is not as discernably “Western” but as previously discussed, Khost and Karachi follow different nationalisms and hence, different family values. While she may not look the part, with her ‘modest’ Eastern clothing and her sanctified relationship within a marriage, but she does play a key role in the “disintegration” of the family unit as the ‘second woman’. Her role within the film is shown largely through Wahid’s trauma around his mother’s untimely death and the part she plays in it. Arguably, her positionality as an outsider asserting a violent and disruptive presence within Wahid’s family places her in the defined ambit of a ‘memsahib’: as the amoral, sexually impure foreign woman. Therefore, it seems that the construction of “good” women in *Moor* is set as oppositional to the oft-English speaking ‘Western’ women who are unconcerned with the sanctity of the nuclear family or the motherland.

But the fathers and sons, who are always awaiting guidance and moral direction by these women, encapsulate a certain failure of masculinity[[12]](#footnote-12) that solidifies the roles these “good” women must observe. These women must contend with the “lack” that these men epitomize: Wahid is unable to provide for his family without selling the land, Wahid’s father was unable to show fidelity to his family, Ehsaanuallah is unable to find ethical means to make a living. Seemingly, they all need external moral compasses—they need these ‘good’ women to anchor them. It is ironic then, that access to mobility and positions of power are mostly held by these very men within the film. Mimicking Pakistani society, the patriarchal social organizations create a system in which the good women enable movement for the men but do not necessarily practice this movement themselves. It is unclear, for example, if Amber is from Karachi or Khost because the narrative of migration, much like in the case of Sarah, is not centered on her. Her arrivals and departures are positioned secondary to those of Ehsaanuallah. In the last scene of the film, Jami finally shows her sitting on a train, being part of a journey. However befittingly, she is accompanied by Wahid, Ehsanullah and a small girl, who is seemingly her daughter with Ehsaanullah. Amber’s movement comes at the behest of her marriage.

Additionally, Amber’s supporting role as a friend and moral anchor is mediated first by her gender and then by her function. In a tongue in cheek moment in the film, when Amber is being introduced to Wahid by a family friend as Ehsaanuallah’s friend and confidant, Wahid shakes his head in disbelief, exclaiming, “Magar..yeh you larki hai!” (“But… she’s a girl!” 01:31:32). His perplexity comes from the relationship Amber and Ehsaanuallah hold that, in conservative colloquial understandings is one that only exists through matrimony. However, it also becomes a moment where the dismissiveness of Wahid’s response to Amber is offset by her overextending willingness to make herself available and functional in the project of saving Ehsanullah from complete moral degeneracy. Jisha Menon in *The Performance of Nationalism* comments on the domestic arrangements within South Asian cinema (in this context, Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*) that allow for a female character’s family within a film to “employ” her to repair their broken lives (61). This character is consumed by the literal labor of providing for her family, but much like Amber and Palwasha, also the emotional labor of propping up the male characters’ aspirations. Palwasha and Amber’s bodies become, the case of Moor, sites upon which “male nationalistic ideologies take shape” and through which the “borders and boundaries of communal identities are formed” (Gopinath, 9).

It seems then, that the only kinds of movements ‘good’ women within *Moor* partake is through the marital bond or patrilocality. Their positions within their new homes are one of “anchors”. They stabilize the otherwise weak foundations of homes that are built on dislocations, through the consistent moral homework that educates the men of these communities about allegiance to family and land. Alternatively, these women may choose an autonomous path that comprises of choices that break away from convention—like Arzo—but at the necessary cost of being pigeonholed as “bad women”. This analysis, however, does not entirely capture the ambivalent space that Amber encapsulates who may be identified as simultaneously autonomous (at least in terms of her mobility) and ‘good’. Her mobility does not seem constrained by marriage or familial responsibility, suggesting an autonomy that is able to exist outside of these institutions. However, at the same time, her mobility only really exists within the film so that she can always arrive whenever Ehsanuallah most needs her.

1. **“Papers, Please”: Of Identity & Mimicry**

Talat, who is a friend of Wahid’s and a mediatory figure between Khost and Karachi, grumbles in a scene that, “Appna Lalu Sardar ban ker phir raha hai…” “(Our Lalu is now prancing around like a Master)” (1:35:00). Talat invokes a performative access to the way Lalu, the previously mentioned land mafia leader, functions within the scope of the film. He has adopted a mannerism that allows him access to a space that was not previously available to him: that is, of a man of an elevated social standing. Lalu is not the only character in Moor who performs a certain ‘foreign-ness’. Arzo’s characterization in the previous section as a “memsahib” also poses questions about the way ‘identity’ and ‘mimicry’ transcribes itself into the film. There are certain characters who mimic affectations and social etiquette of the class or setting they aspire to belong to, such as Ehsanuallah adopting a lifestyle that better suits the social milieu of Karachi. In this case, as Menon puts it, “their bodies carry stories” or are inscribed with social power that locates their desires onto the canvas of their bodies (22). But outside of the performance of class, the film is filled with mimesis of other types as well: most notably, the forgery of documents and the creation of fake identities. If this paper argues for a “necessity of movement” in relation to class mobility, then it is also necessary to explore the way this movement and displacement informs the creation of individual identities.

As previously discussed, Ehsanullah’s positionality within Karachi as an ‘imposter’ also invites a discussion on the way the fabric of the city is teeming with these ‘imposter’ figures. Karachi, Jami implies, seems to be a city in limbo. It is either made of migrants coming from faraway places such as Khost, or future-migrants hoping to leave Pakistan. It seems to be stuck in two places at once: both invoking a longing for a home that is unattainable. Karachi’s duality is also reflected in the way that its people function: they ‘perform’ this duality through a practice that Homi K. Bhabha’s calls ‘mimicry’ in his essay “Of Mimicry and Men”, where the colonial subject (in this case, the migrant) feels they can lessen their alienation from the colonizer’s culture by adopting its practices. This imitation gives them a semblance of control over their estrangement but simultaneously splinters them into a dual identity— an affliction identical to those of migrants trying to settle into homes foreign to them. Ehsanuallah, for example, admits to Lalarukh that, “Karachi tou kisi ko bhi badal sakta hai” (“Karachi can change anyone”, 00:27:30). He has had to change and adapt according to the tenets of the ‘national family’ of Karachi through a process that Jose Esteban Munoz calls “disidentification” in his book by the same name. Munoz defines disidentification, in queer theory, as a “survival strategy” by which minority subjects negotiate public spaces which continually punish the “existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). In order for minority subjects to survive a “hostile public space”, they need to follow a conformist path which results in identities being formed in response to the “cultural logistics of heteronormativity” (5). So, when Amber confronts Ehsanullah in a dingy *chai* shop by imploring, “Tumhay pata bhi hai yeh kitna bara fraud hai? … yeh kaam buhat ghatiya log kertay hain!” (“Do you even know how fraudulent this work is? … only denigrates do this sort of thing” 1:2:10), Ehsanuallah’s response invokes a certain poignancy. He interrupts her to tell her the things he has had to do to assimilate and belong to a city where the class praxis and social organization is set up to alienate him.

If Ehsanuallah must perform a certain avariciousness and embrace materialism to integrate in Karachi, perhaps characters such as Arzo have already achieved a complete assimilation into this system. Arguably, she too, much like Ehsanuallah has learnt the ‘strategies’ through which survival is possible in Karachi’s cut-throat urbanity. But in Arzo’s case, her ‘Western-ness’ also comes at the behest of another sort of identity crisis—one that possibly mars the rest of the country, as well. Homi Bhabha in ‘Of Mimicry and Men’ posits the idea of a mimetic ambivalence that plagues a colonial subject: that is, they are “almost the same (as the colonizer) but not quite” (127). He charts the approach through which the colonial mission of Christian reform within the subcontinent was predicated on a “partial diffusion of Christianity and a partial influence of moral improvements” (127). This meant that there was an understanding that the company’s success would depend on “interpellation”: a false sense of a personal identity for the natives, while their mannerisms imitate those of the English. Bhabha insists, hence, that this mimicry is not a complete imitation, rather a replication that rests on ‘difference’. It recognizes the ambivalence of the gaze through which the colonized identifies the colonizer as corrupt and distrustful yet continues to look towards them with desire. Leela Gandhi in her chapter “After Colonialism” also speaks to this relationship which comes with “the compulsion to return a voyeuristic gaze upon Europe” (11). To possess an identity that imitates that of the colonizer and to look to it with desire seems to be a condition inherited by the colonized. Arguably then, in *Moor*, displacement is not the only inherited factor, rather there is also an inheritance of an identity from a colonial past which forever renders the postcolonial subject’s identity formation as a mimetic exercise. This, perhaps, also explains the strangely erratic nature that most characters take within the film where they are unable to know with certainty what they really want or who they really are. For example, Wahid’s oscillation between selling the land or saving the land, or Palwasha’s simultaneous need to leave Khost (because there is nothing left here) and to protect Khost or perhaps, Asghar’s need to please his father by telling lies (through his visa documents) but also never telling a lie (as he says in his final video).

Extending this argument forward, perhaps then Arzo’s indictment in *Moor* as a “bad woman” also comes from her betrayal to a cultural identity that the film so assertively pushes for: it invokes a national pride that looks down on ‘foreignness’ and the imitation of ‘Western’ mannerism. But interestingly, there is also ambivalence embedded in the way Jami chooses to narrate and film *Moor*. If it suggests a contempt for the anglicized urbanity of Karachi and its people, it also simultaneously mimics ‘Western’ cinematic tropes. In a scene towards the end of the film where Ehsanuallah’s grief and confusion culminate in an emotional climax, he expresses it by smashing a car his friend just bought. This overtly gendered violence also figures into a cathartic release for a troubled Ehsanullah, but undeniably recalls a performance of masculine anger as shown repeatedly in certain global cinema (For example, John Goodman in *The Big Lebowski,* 1998 or Tobey McGuire smashing kitchen cabinets in *Brothers,* 2009). This violence within the film also appears as a spectacle, seemingly to inform the audience of the cruelty embedded in these fissures in identity and selfhood. Additionally, the ‘shady’ back alleys of Karachi where there seem to be loan sharks lurking and loud, camp parties happening (which resemble the atmosphere of clubs) also suggest a ‘villainous’ urban city that has been a repeated occurrence in television and cinema (like the fictional Gotham from Batman, loosely imitating New York City). Outside of parties where corrupt deals are made, another indicator of moral degradation is the beer cans that litter Ehsanuallah’s office at the pinnacle of his decadency. It is important to note that since the alcohol ban in Pakistan in the 70s’, which also extended to the closure of bars, clubs and casinos under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s populist government, the accessibility to these spaces and intoxicants is assumed to be far more prevalent in the film, than it is in reality. *Moor* either mimics the ‘idea’ of a corrupt city, delineated by global cinema and television, or replicates the memory of a Pakistan not plagued by the “Islamization” polices in the 70s’.

It seems then that these mimetic practices have been deeply encoded into the performances of the characters but also through the way the narrative and cinematography unfold in the film. A closer inspection of this idea can also be done through Harsha Walia’s conception of imposters in her book *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Walia claims that the “production of authenticity” is continually undercut in the globalized world. She writes, “The irony of our time perhaps lies in efforts to tighten borders and fix authenticity while bodies and voices change, exchange and multiply leaving little trace of truth and origin” (30). In this case then, arguably, all migrants are imposters, and all imposters are people displaced or people departing. The forging of documents by Ehsanuallah is just part of the moral indictment levied towards him, rather it is equally the fact that the way he performs his identity has shifted and changed in Karachi, much like Arzo’s. Asghar, Amber and Bagoo, according to the same logic, have maintained their religiously motivated and culturally grounded identities which makes them emphatically noble and righteous within the film. They have held onto what are called the fabled “primordial identities” referenced in the *Home* section (31). But, as argued through this section, the idea of originals is lost in the mimetic performance of tropes and doubles within the film, and, arguably, in the experience of migrancy as noted by Walia. *Moor* also plays on the idea of mimicry through the appearance of tropes within the film that group characters into recognizable conventions. For example, the saints (like Palwasha, Bagoo and Amber), the corrupt ones (Lalu and Zahir, Ehsanullah’s friend, Imtisal and Arzo) and the ones being pulled in both directions and in need of saving: like Wahid and Ehsanullah.

Ultimately, *Moor* encapsulates the idea of mimicry through several different ways: the performance of class, the forgery of documents and the mimesis of the aesthetics and storytelling tropes Jami chooses to include in the film. All these instances inform the ways in which identity formation happens for the displaced, but also represent the recurring notion of ambivalence throughout the film.

1. **Conclusion:**

In this paper I have argued that in Jami’s *Moor* displacement is passed down from one generation to the next like a family heirloom. The inheritance of loss and separation also creates conditions for what I call a ‘fractured family’ that stands central to the narrative of *Moor*. Aspirations of class mobility come at the behest of movement away from ‘home’ and the mother(land) to other homes and lands that are often equally troubled. At the core of these movements, necessarily, is violence—in *Moor* it often functions as a spectacle that mars the migrant’s bodies, their possessions, and their sense of identity.

In “Homeward Bound”, I explore the existence of arbitrary borders and phantom homes that “evade a destination” (Ahmed, 331). In *Moor*, home-spaces exist in Bagoo and Wahid’s remembrance of them. In remembering a primordial home, the exiled are able to manufacture a sense of belonging and rootedness that otherwise eludes the continually displaced migrants. Ultimately, the migrant experience is such that all homes are borne out of, as Sara Ahmed puts it, movements, and dislocations. In *Moor* too, Jami’s characters embody this ‘dislocation’ through their position of being either inherently displaced or permanently stuck in limbo between many ‘homes’.

Taking from this, in “Tracks & Tribe-ulations”, I consider the relationship between these homes and the lands they are built on. The act of leaving a ‘motherland’ is treated as an innate betrayal in *Moor*. And the accessibility to another land is contingent on being able to ‘become’ like the Other. The conception of the Other, as Nandita Sharma postulates, is formed through the conflation of family, land, and nation, which leads to the formation of a ‘national family’ belonging to a ‘national homeland’ that always stands as an autonomous entity. These ideas also inform the way “good” and “bad” nationalisms operate in the separate lands of Khost, Balochistan and Karachi, Sindh in *Moor*. Hence, these differing nationalisms adhere to different values and require different sacrifices from their members. As previously mentioned, violence is the only ubiquitous experience that binds these motherlands together.

Additionally, in “*Moor/ Baba/ Khandaan”,* I explore who inherits this heirloom of loss and displacement and who passes on this inheritance. This exploration also requires a consideration of the way in which gendered differences inform movement within the film, as well as in Pakistani society. Women often appear as anchors that ground and instruct ‘derailed’ men. Moor asserts a narrative of ‘good’ traditional women vs ‘bad’ western one, also opening the ambit to ideas of performatively and identity crises within the film.

Displaced identities, I argue in “Papers Please”, are consistently mimicking positions or roles that they aspire to attain. Arguably, in the experience of migrancy, the movement alone to a foreign home is not enough but also requires a reconfiguration of one’s identity. In the case of Ehsanuallah, borrowing from Munoz, this ‘disidentification’ also functions as a defense against the hostile environment of a villainous Karachi where ‘pretending to belong’ may, optimistically, result in belonging at some point. But it also invites debate on the concept of the “primordial identity”, that in the case of a former colony like Pakistan, is a contested space of loathing yet desiring to become like the ‘foreigner’.

Desire is intrinsically linked to the idea of possibilities. For the characters in *Moor*, desire concocts a world in which, for Ehsanuallah, assimilation is possible, for Amber integrity is possible, for Palwasha loyalty to one’s land is possible and for Wahid, financial stability is possible. Even Baggo wishes for a world in which, “Hum appna station banae ga… log sirf trainoun mei safar keray ga” (“I will build my own station… people will only travel on these trains” 1:16:00). Each character holds a dream in the wake of despair—and these dreams are predicated on persistent movements and ever-changing homes. But this also invites an inspection into ideas this paper does not comment on: the place of bodies that remain stationary as the homes change around them. Wahid is not the only character who resists movement in Moor— the tribal heads within the film who swear to protect the Baloch land are also rooted in their fealty to it. One wonders then if there is another way to conceive displacement? Could it also be encapsulated in these stationary bodies, who feel displaced not from movement, but of the way the world has altered around them?

In a climactic moment towards the end of the film, Wahid begrudgingly finds himself in Karachi, partially to look for Ehsanuallah, and partially to report the land mafia’s activities in Khost. In one fell swoop, the state arrests the offenders and restores Wahid’s pension for his years as a station master. With his newfound money in hand, Wahid is taken to a bank by Talat to make a deposit. However, Wahid has never been to one and does not understand how the institution functions—he has a paroxysmal collapse as the bank teller takes his money and, in a rage, assaults the bank teller. Jami’s intention with this scene was possibly to show the degree to which Wahid’s simple life in Khost is removed from the fast-moving urbanity of Karachi. But it is also testament to the fact that the world has changed around Wahid while he stays frozen in this “idyllic moment outside of history” (Gopinath, 3). This idea also invites consideration of the citizens who did not make migratory journeys during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. If the people, place, state, and religion changed around them as both the nascent nations adopted new identities, how did their relationship to the homeland adapt to this shift? Could their stillness equally encapsulate the crisis of identity and unhomeliness that come from constant movement? Could being stationary still mean displaced?

But most importantly, this essay and discussion also invites considerations about the culture that produces such works. If *Moor* takes its narrative from culturally grounded realities in Pakistan, can inferences be drawn from the film about the culture too? Inversely, could leaving, separating, and dislocating be viewed as a cultural heirloom within Pakistan? Is the yearning for return “to the nourishment of people, culture and geography” (Said, 358) but marred by the impossibility of it, an inheritance of an entire people?

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1. This detail is developed further in the “Land & Nationalism” section. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The film suggests in its opening sequence that the ‘glory days’ of the Railway were before the 1980’s, after which “corrupt forces” worked to “systemically destroy the railroads” in order to build other transportation systems (00:01:08). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This idea is explored further in the “Identity & Mimicry” section. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan, yet the least industrialized. Ever since the 1970’s when a guerrilla war was launched against the State and ended in a bloody confrontation with the Pakistan army, separatist elements have been brewing in the province. Arguably, a major contention is the inability of the “highly centralized state of Pakistan” to recognize the regional and ethnic autonomy of the many tribes that exist within Balochistan (Khan, 281). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The proposed ‘villainy’ of Karachi is a recurrent trope in the film that finds its way in all sections and is developed through different lenses. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In *Moor*, land is repeatedly referred to as a ‘mother/land’. The notion of motherhood invokes an image of fecundity: partially of resources and nationalistic fervor but also perhaps in the case of Moor, of the deluge of the problems and dislocations it births. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the opening sequence of the film, Jami notes that due to the work of these “corrupt forces”, villages and settlements around that stations have turned into ghost towns as they have been made inaccessible by the stripping of tracks from the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Quran, a holy book for the Muslims, is understood as a ‘moral code’ to live by for a believer. In *Moor,* hence, there is a conflation of religion with morality all through the film. Religion informs what is ‘good’ and ‘righteous’ conduct. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Good’ women through the film are necessarily portrayed wearing a *dupatta* or *chaddor*, insisting once again on a modesty based on religious tenets. But it simultaneously implies that women who carry the responsibility of motherhood and guidance are no longer permitted space within society to celebrate their youth or autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The etymology of the English language belongs elsewhere to the ‘other’, to the elusive West. To speak in English is, to quote Leela Gandhi, an act of speaking “against oneself” (13). In Moor hence, arguably, it is portrayed as a betrayal to land, language, and tradition. It also invites an inspection into ideas of ‘identity formation and performativity’ that are discussed in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. a South Asian garment comprising of loose, voluminous pants and a long shirt that usually goes beyond the knees. A dupatta is a *chaddor*/ scarf worn around the neck to cover the chest and oftentimes, draped over the head. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Under a patriarchal social system, this failure, I argue, is contingent on these men’s inability to provide financial, emotional, or moral support to their families and especially, the women in their lives. They are rudderless and need constant guidance. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)