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I Should *Kal* My Mom:  
Diasporic Longing for the Mother/Land in Fatimah Asghar's  
Poetry

An Honors Thesis

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To Those Who've Made the Mistake of Loving Me

thank you

Human recognition initiates on the level of the superficial, inseparably binding us to our presentation. Agency over our presentation is naturally and structurally limited. While we can modify our presentation, we are effectively trapped by how our individual bodies are considered and identified by structural forces. Particularly binding are racialized and gendered visibilities. Individuals of such visible identities are therefore subject to both the expectation and responsibility of (expertly) representing their identity. This is particularly notable when observing the contrasting visibilities between South Asians in geo-political spaces such as the United States, which carries a normalized conflation of American national identity with white-western presentation (Koshy 154). Fatimah Asghar is an inspirational poet (and Emmy-nominated screenwriter/producer). In her debut collection, *If They Come for Us*, published in 2018 by One World/Random House, Asghar engages with her visibilities as a Pakistani-Kashmiri assigned-woman and the complications of her diasporic identity in the American cultural and political discourse.

Blissful ignorance is possible for those in power. Those in positions of privilege may choose to forget the historical impositions of neo/colonialism, patriarchy, and racism, effectively reassigning these oppressive ideologies to haunt the annals of history as ghosts - at least as far as the white-west is concerned. Forgetting is not possible for those continually subject to these structuralized norms. Fatimah Asghar "takes up this responsibility to record and make these ghosts of history visible" (J. Wong 2) in her writing, invoking erased or revisioned histories of oppression and resistance. This thesis engages with Asghar's poetry, places it in its historical context, and seeks to expose connections between intergenerational maternal connection and transmission and the historical connection for a lost *motherland*. Thinkers from discourses on diaspora, post- and anti-colonialism, and Asian-American identity and literature will be employed to carefully navigate such a critical tightrope.

Developing a cultural identity under diaspora is a daunting task. Stuart Hall formulates a critical framework towards such a practice by complicating Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist concept of *différance* via conversation

with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor's notion of the *présence*. Derrida's *différance* brings to question the permanence of linguistic signification. When considered through Césaire and Senghor's *présence*, Hall draws a similar conclusion regarding identity. Cultural identity "belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 236). The traumas sustained and imparted by our ancestors continue to influence contemporary experiences. "Listening to the dead also creates a community of voices linked together through history and trauma" (J. Wong 4). Individuals, communities - as suggested by Jane Wong - and geo-political bodies histories and futurities are repeatedly considered, codified, and reconsidered in the arbitrary quest for personal or political "truth." These constantly shifting and conflicting considerations of history force the question of to whom - if anyone - cultural identity expressly belongs "at the necessary and temporary 'break'" that is the present (Hall 240). Naturally, such *présences* play differently in different diasporas and on different intersections of identity. In Fatimah Asghar's case, an assigned woman of Pakistani-Kashmiri heritage working in the United States,

her experience is informed by particular historical *présences*. Her Pakistani-Kashmiri *présence*, complicated by various regional and international conflicts. Her American *présence*, a constant influence of the white-west in her diasporic experience. And "the sliding term" of her gender and sexuality, complicated by the machinations of the patriarchy (Hall 240).

Asghar's Pakistani-Kashmiri heritage is itself informed by the complicated histories of regional religious conflict, colonial & anti-colonial conflict, and geo-political territorial conflict. The entanglements between these historical conflicts can be seen most clearly in the Partition of India/Pakistan. The phrase 'Partition of India' calls to the white-western imagination the division of colonial India into the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan 1947. Despite the particularly militarized histories of colonial practice, Fanon points to the more insidious means and motivations behind colonialism:

Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of

perverted logic, it turns to the past of  
oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and  
destroys it. (170)

The British colonial presence carefully manipulated the conflictual relationship between the region's Hindu and Muslim populations (Roy 77). Come 1945, with the electoral victory of the Labour Party amid the economic devastation wrought by World War II, the sun finally began to set on the British Empire. This prompted the British to withdraw colonial forces from India quickly, and thereby not inconsequentially, in order to minimize economic strain on the fatherland (Bates). The colonial management of the Hindu-Muslim conflict dissolved with the British Raj; leaving behind geographical and ideological rifts that the British presence-turned-absence only exacerbated. The moment of Partition's hegemonization, the transition from August 14<sup>th</sup> to August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, invites consideration of how historical and structural forces commandeer our consideration of time as linear; of the past as the past; of the future as the future; and of the present as temporary. A geo-political *body* expressly caught in this strange middle ground wherein time, and therefore the

histories supposedly fixed therein, collapses is Kashmir: a point of continued conflict, now, over 70 linear years later.

Within two months of Partition, the Muslim majority populace of Kashmir staged a Pakistan-backed insurgency against the state ruler, leading to war between India and Pakistan in and over Kashmir (McKevitt, Stein 358). This war was the first of a continuing series of skirmishes between India and Pakistan regarding the geo-political rights to Kashmir. This conflict periodically flares into larger wars, notably the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1999 (there was also a war between the countries in 1971, not explicitly regarding Kashmir, but on the eventual secession of erstwhile East Pakistan into what is now Bangladesh). Tensions hang heavy to this day. 20 years after the last Indo-Pakistani war, the countries almost descended into war once again in the early months of 2019 (Al Jazeera). The development of a cultural identity can prove difficult for those caught within this geo-political conflict. Such difficulty is complicated by the diasporic experience: while numbers vary, 12 to 14 million people were displaced in the immediate fallout of Partition, "one



of the largest forced migrations in human history" (McKevitt, Whitehead, Asghar). A fair number of whom belong to the Kashmiri diaspora, displaced from their "political context of origin" by the Indo-Pakistani conflict of recognition and (re-)alignment (Sökefeld). Kashmir's status as effectively "trapped" by this historical conflict shows that "there is simply no grave for the dead," aligning with Hall's argument that "[c]ultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (J. Wong 3; Hall 236). These primarily militaristic histories of colonialism and post/colonial intra-ethnic conflict already complicate the development of cultural identity for Pakistani-Kashmiri folk. Said development is then further complicated under diasporic conditions, with particular regard to the trappings of South Asian visibility in the United States.

Asghar's American *présence* is distinct from Hall's *Présence Américaine*, most notably in their disparate proximities to the cultural and political consciousness of the United States. Where, for Hall, *Présence Américaine* refers to America in the "broader sense: America, the 'New World,' *Terra Incognita*;" for Asghar, the American *présence* refers to America "in its 'first-world' sense" (240). The

"first-world" sense being the culturally and politically developed capitalist nation-state that is the contemporary United States in which Asghar's diasporic experience and cultural/creative production exists.

As a European Christian settler colony, the United States is built on practices of white supremacy. The politico-cultural body of the United States labors to maintain such foundational ideologies by way of coercion and submission of the population of (visible) color through legislation and militarization. This political history permeates the cultural identity of being American. In response to the 9/11 attacks, with focus on al-Qaeda as the culprits, then-President George W Bush declared a "war on terrorism," a phrase which has since evolved simply into "war on terror" (Bush, Bazinet). In doing so, Bush capitalized on a historically present but not immediately justifiable anti-Muslim sentiment embedded in the fabric of the nation. Post-9/11, the historical otherization of Muslims was recognized in the white-national consciousness as valid, leading to increased violence against assumed Muslims (Schevitz).

Such anti-Muslim discourse and violence persists to this day, reinforced by white supremacist movements in Europe (a politico-cultural influence to the United States) during and following the Syrian Refugee Crisis and in the United States through its political rhetoric. Invoking and stoking sentiments latent but still persistent from the post-9/11 era, now-President Donald J Trump capitalized on the white supremacist Christian foundations of the United States during his 2016 presidential campaign. Following his inauguration in 2017, Trump issued a series of what are colloquially referred to as "Muslim bans," the most recent of which has been upheld by the Supreme Court of the United States (Liptak). The political and cultural consciousness of the United States has thus been oriented structurally against apparent Muslims.

The gendered *présence* is the "most ambiguous," as Hall says regarding his *Présence Américaine* (240), when considering the unfixed and fluid nature of gender and sexuality. The ethno-cultural *présences* mentioned above complicate gender and sexual identifications and presentations. As noted above, British colonialism capitalized on existing ethnic and religious tensions in

South Asia. Similarly, the colonial British and, following de/colonization, the neo/colonial (primarily) corporatized (primarily) white-west capitalize on existing gender tensions. While not aligning explicitly with that of the white-west, patriarchal norms have a historical precedence in South Asian cultures (Nainar 1). This historical precedent granted the British and now, more largely, grant the white-west an ideological entry-point to establish a functional foothold in the still contested territory. The white-west, patriarchal in itself, reinforces such norms through both the economic dependence of "previously" colonized nations upon "previously" colonial nations and the saturation of white-western cultural products in previously colonized nations. In doing so, the white-west reminds assigned women of their historical and commodified objectification through expectations of heteronormative maternal futurity. The structuralization of patriarchy in the white-west and in the neo/colonized world manifest most violently in the sexual objectification of assigned women. Following Partition, "an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted and raped" (Asghar). Expectations of

sexualization and heteronormative futurity functionally haunt assigned women under diaspora in the United States.

Living under such threats of interpersonal and state violence along primarily racialized and gendered lines binds visibly marginalized individuals to the historical narratives of their identity, perpetually subjecting them to traumas that the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy dispense and reinforce, to borrow from bell hooks. This constant and historically cyclical subjection challenges the linear construction of time due to the impact that histories and futurities have upon the body of the individual; a body which exists at the functionally abstract and random moment of consideration (Hall 237). Fatimah Asghar skillfully addresses these haunting *présences* in her poetry, particularly in *Kal*:

Allah, you gave us a language  
where yesterday & tomorrow  
are the same word. Kal.

A spell cast with the entire  
mouth. Back of the throat  
to teeth. Tomorrow means I might

have her forever. Yesterday means  
I say goodbye, again.

Kal means they are the same.

I know you can bend time.

I am merely asking for what  
is mine. Give me my mother for no

other reason than I deserve her.

If yesterday & tomorrow are the same  
pluck the flower of my mother's body

from the soil. Kal means I'm in the crib,  
eyelashes wet as she looks over me.

Kal means I'm on the bed,

crawling away from her, my father  
back from work. Kal means she's  
dancing at my wedding not-yet come.

Kal means she's oiling my hair  
before the first day of school. Kal  
means I wake to her strange voice

in the kitchen. Kal means  
she's holding my unborn baby  
in her arms, helping me pick a name.

27 lines structured into 9 tercets, we will navigate this  
poem stanza-by-stanza, occasionally breaking to focus on a  
line in the larger context of the its respective stanza.

Finally, we will address the poem as a larger, singular project - a single body upon which the previous and forthcoming lines & stanzas act at the unique point of engagement. In the first stanza, Asghar offers:

Allah, you gave us a language  
 where yesterday & tomorrow  
 are the same word. Kal. (Asghar 10)

This thesis - and in the spirit of fairness, this writer (it's me! hello) - presumes Asghar to be the narrator of the poem. Asghar immediately establishes the religious *présence* in the outset of the poem through the invocation of "Allah," the sole deity in the monotheistic Abrahamic religion of Islam. In doing so, Asghar frames the poem within the cultural context of her religious heritage. Religion and spirituality are historically foundational to the development of community and culture. Therefore, religious deities possess massive influence over the normalization of identities and power dynamics thereof. Recognizing this, Asghar acknowledges Allah's gendered monopoly of cultural influence. The omnipresence of Abrahamic deities, and thereby their cultural influence, is reinforced and reinforces, despite their physical absence - especially in Islam, which practices aniconism, through

intergenerational transmission and, in the particular case of Islam, the ethnicization & subsequent persecution of religion.

Allah, as the purveyor of language in the narrative of the poem, establishes and executes the paternalistic function of men and masculine-assigned folk as provider and as protector. Having already recognized the gendering of societal norms along the binarization of gender assignment, Allah's gendering along the masculine reinforces the aforementioned roles and expectations imposed upon assigned women. This effectively resigns womanhood as ghostly, to exist in the shadows of a deified manhood. In the subsequent line, "where yesterday & tomorrow," Asghar succinctly recognizes that any functional moment of experience exists linearly between a past, "yesterday," and a future, "tomorrow" (Asghar 10). This experience of time is similar to the diasporic experience where we "exist in the hyphen" as Hasan Minhaj explained in an interview with NPR.

The experience of time as between yesterday and tomorrow is represented by the ampersand (&) that Asghar places between the two. The rest of the sentence, bleeding



into the final line of the tercet, subverts the normalization of time as linear by noting that "yesterday & tomorrow / are the same word. Kal." (Asghar 10).

Withholding the sameness of the two Anglophone terms until even the following line paces the reader's consideration of time and language. By explicitly drawing attention to their sameness in Allah's language, what might be considered a post/colonial language, Asghar plays with the visuality and history of the ampersand in the second line.

Representative of the conjunction "and," the ampersand originated as a ligature for the Latin word "et" (Merriam-Webster). The two characters collapsed upon one another to yield an early representation of the glyph. The ampersand is now signified by the glyph "&," a further evolution of the original character. Ampersand as a term is "a corruption of the phrase 'and *per se* & (and)'" (Glaister). Its imagery as a twisted, knotted, warped logogram and its historical and linguistic origins as a collapsed means of signification invokes the complicated and collapsing histories of Kashmir's geo-political existence and the diasporic experience. Through the conscious use of the ampersand, Asghar illustrates the

interconnected and fluid nature of time and the diaspora at the point of bodily experience. Language and linguistic signification are thus exposed as fluid, as unfixed; as has been the nature of identity under diaspora and post/colonial influence. Rapid technological development in the late 1950s, also known as the Digital Revolution, enabled the white-west to more insidiously and efficiently maintain and propagate capitalism and globalization through neo/colonialism.

The second stanza further engages with the religious and spiritual influences and orients it explicitly towards the body:

A spell cast with the entire  
mouth. Back of the throat  
to teeth. Tomorrow means I might (Asghar 10)

Considering the global historical context of Partition and Kashmir and the increased wealth disparity between "previously" colonial and "previously" colonized nations by way of technological development and neo/colonialism directly conflicts with the cultural significance of religious and spiritual heritage. By recognizing language, the act of speaking, as "[a] spell cast," Asghar immediately challenges this conflict and the reductive

dismissal of non-colonially empowered religions by drawing attention to the continued significance of religion, especially under capitalism's increasing global insistence on uniformity. Breaking the sentence after the word "entire" speaks to this in recognizing the casting of a spell as a potentially collective action, recognizing the community solidarity that comes with organized religion. Community, whether religious, cultural, ethnic, or otherwise, is built upon the individual.

The agency of the implied community in the poem is reoriented towards the individual with the second line finishing the sentence on the word "mouth." Asghar continues, "Back of the throat to teeth." Tracking the utterance of the word "Kal" with a hyperfocus on its travel through the body reinforces the functional significance of the individual. Continuing to work under the presumption that Asghar is the narrator, draws attention to the pervasiveness of the patriarchy as it acts upon the body of an assigned woman. Such focalization through the bodily imagery is reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's feminist film critique of the male gaze. Assigned women are subject to objectification under the male gaze as they navigate their

individual experience. Gendering under the male gaze is further complicated by diaspora. In the white-west, where the patriarchy is notably pervasive, structuralized, and reinforced, orientalism and exoticism are similarly pervasive. The exoticization of ethnicized assigned women compounds the sexualization of women assigned bodies under patriarchy and the male gaze.

Asghar leaves the stanza hanging with the sentence fragment, "Tomorrow means I might" (10). Again, teasing the reader with the lack of definitive knowledge regarding what is or what "might" be to come. In closing the stanza as such, Asghar pulls the reader towards the void, the vast emptiness that is "tomorrow" when considering time as linear. As noted above, there is no such thing as a blank canvas regarding futures; no pureness rendering "tomorrow" a site of pure projection. The agency implied in such a concept is a privilege, an unearned advantage, reserved to those of visibilities and visible identities that have forcibly positioned themselves as greater in the constructed hierarchies that have been structuralized through post/colonial mobilization and reinforced through techno-globalization. Knowing this, having experienced this

through the weighted histories to which Muslim women of the diaspora have been subject, and being consciously and constantly bombarded with the futurities imposed upon Muslim identified and women assigned folks, particularly in the white-west.

The third stanza finishes the thought, offering the reader a point of grounding in the process:

have her forever. Yesterday means  
I say goodbye, again.

Kal means they are the same. (Asghar 10)

"have her forever." hangs heavy in the imagination. This fragment orients the poem towards a new subject, "her." The sentences formed between lines 6 and 9 in the poem, "Tomorrow means I might // ..." corporealize the fluidity and non-linear indeterminacy of time. "Her," later revealed to be Asghar's mother, exists liminally, caught in the interstice between "tomorrow" and "yesterday," between "kal," and "kal." Asghar ends the stanza with a full sentence, technically the first stanza in which this happens. In doing so, she challenges the lack of control over time through her definitive manipulation of language. A sense of stability returns to the poem, granting the reader pause, an opportunity to step away, get a drink of

water, and return at their own pace, now and always carrying this poem in their experience of the inconsistent constancy of time.

Asghar opens the fourth stanza with a complete sentence, occupying its own dedicated line, the only other instance of which is the end of the previous stanza:

I know you can bend time.

I am merely asking for what

is mine. Give me my mother for no (Asghar 10)

The shortness of these two sentences, "Kal means they are the same. // I know you can bend time." and the succession in which they are offered, reflects a shortness in Asghar's tone. Having drifted away from directly addressing Allah after the first sentence, she returns, 7 lines, 6 sentences, 2 stanzas later. If the construction and understanding of time as linear is human, then we must go beyond the human to retrieve what might be lost therein.

She therefore confronts Him, ensuring that she knows what is within His power: everything. Through time, everything. In stark contrast to Allah's ability to bend time, Asghar is trapped in her experience of time wherein her mother is past despite continuing to haunt her life. Dropping the stanza on the "no" offers commentary on the

commodification of the feminized and racialized body. Where there should not be a notion of exchange dictating the movements of any bodies, capitalism challenges this by assigning certain labor to particular identities while abstracting them from their labor-value through lateral division, marginalization. Asghar teases out the emotionality of this abstraction while acknowledging the forcibly maintained absence of her mother through Allah's invisible and structuralized power.

Despite noting that motherland and fatherland are both fluid terms used to refer to the geography of one's ethnic heritage, this thesis specifically and consciously engages the term motherland for a few reasons. In Orientalism, the (white-)west is masculinized while the "Orient" is simultaneously feminized and infantilized. These narratives have historically been used to justify imperialism and colonialism in the region on the grounds of saving and civilizing the intended colonial subjects. Additionally, originating in the Indian Independence Movement from 1857 to Partition, the Indian Subcontinent was personified through the phrase "Bhāratmātā," literally translating to "Mother India." Finally, women are often designated as the

bearers of wealth and culture, particularly under diaspora while the men are designated as the providers and protectors.

This sentiment of interpersonal and maternal loss and longing in the poem is paralleled in the shared experience of diaspora. As noted above, the diaspora resultant of Partition is rooted in physical and structural violence. Those navigating a diasporic experience are often therefore abstracted from their motherland through economic or citizenship limitations and through representations of their motherland in media. Even if one has the means and mobility to do so, the act of a pilgrimage to one's motherland, one's ethno-cultural point of origin, is discouraged through narratives of violence which are cyclically reinforced and even validated by structural forces. Under neo/colonialism, such a stringent grip is maintained through the white-west's controlled export of their own cultural production.

Asghar finishes the sentence left hanging at the close of the previous stanza with the first line of the following one:

other reason than I deserve her.  
If yesterday & tomorrow are the same



pluck the flower of my mother's body (Asghar 10)

Challenging the capitalist commodification of the individual, their influence, and intergenerational support, Asghar reminds Allah, already established as the source and gatekeeper of ultimate power, that she owes Him nothing while He owes her a mother, taken from her too soon. Recognizing Allah's absence and His continued influence by way of His omnipotence, we can see how His influence is paralleled in the continued supremacy of a Eurocentric patriarchal global capitalism that similarly serves as functional gatekeeper to one's motherland. In the final two lines of the tercet, Asghar refers to her mother's body as a flower. She reminds us that time is not linear and invokes the cyclical nature of life as a flower. Blossoming in the warmer months and decaying in the colder ones.

She continues this metaphor in the following tercet:

from the soil. Kal means I'm in the crib,  
 eyelashes wet as she looks over me.  
 Kal means I'm on the bed, (Asghar 10)

If the soil is thereby noted as indicating the passage of time, removing the flower therefrom is an affront to the very notion of time as linear, or even processional. Playing with that, Asghar visualizes herself as abruptly

and once more a child. She applies the definition of "Kal" to her various experiences and engagements with and relating to her mother. The flower imagery lends a certain pastoral serenity, disrupted by the chaotic experiences of colonialism, diaspora, and displacement. This calm is reflected in the romantic retrospective Asghar offers in the rest of the stanza. She extends this tone through the remainder of the poem, challenging and disrupting structural oppressive norms that otherwise permeate the interpersonal at the point of the body.

Asghar engages with this in the following stanza:

crawling away from her, my father  
back from work. Kal means she's  
dancing at my wedding not-yet come. (Asghar 11)

The pastoral reminiscence is briefly tinged with lamentation as her time with her mother is interrupted by the father, having returned from his patriarcho-capitalist duties as provider. One of two masculinized figures mentioned in the poem, the patriarchal imposition of the father weighs on the maternal relationship as it manifests in the poem's implicit normalization of his absence. Considering the patriarchal heteronormative roles imposed upon women, it can be understood that the mother is

normalized as being a presence, in direct and functional opposition to the father's absence. This assumed presence, expected permanence, of the mother is noted in Asghar's crawling away from her and towards the consistently absented presence.

This distancing occurs under diaspora, as well. Returning to the gendering of Orientalism, the "crawling away from" the mother can be understood as the sheer act and experience of displacement. The particular verb "crawling" shifts to invoke a grueling effort and pace, especially when contextualized by displacement in the Kashmiri conflict. The "father / back from work." is therefore the paternalistic white-west, self-narrated as protectorate, as providence in itself.

The sole invocation of the father throughout the poem falling in this stanza alone serves as a turning point in the poem. Where Asghar was before focused on the shared, lived experiences of her and her mother, the remainder of that tercet, "Kal means she's / dancing at my wedding not-yet come." and the remaining stanzas are oriented towards her imaginings of what shared and lived experiences there could have been. The developmental milestones for

which the mother should be present are corrupted by her explicitly noted absence. Time itself, and the reader's sense of it, are similarly corrupted through the poem's commandeering thereof:

Kal means she's oiling my hair  
before the first day of school. Kal  
means I wake to her strange voice (Asghar 11)

There is a cultural significance placed on the hair of assigned women in South Asian households. Oiling hair is therefore a common practice in such spaces. Coconut oil helps to strengthen hair, reduce tangling, and encourage growth. The mother's presence here, particularly in a seemingly minor task, introduces the notion of intergenerationally transmitted performances and expectations of gender assignments.

This practice, for Asghar and her ghostly mother, falls on "the first day of school." The lack of clarifying which year of school reminds the reader that time is non-linear and unfixed while also implying a repetition of this particular intimate engagement. The reification of repeated behaviors functionally constitutes tradition; in this case, it constitutes tradition within this household. This personal tradition is disrupted by the loss of the

mother, just as cultural traditions are disrupted by colonial and capitalist forces. Such traditions, and their rediscovery and reclamation, are further disrupted by diaspora. Notable practices by which this is executed are the expectations of assimilation and acculturation levied against citizenship and its supposed privileges and the stigmatization of certain visibilities within the white-west. The latter of these two, as it pertains to the United States, is noted above in the politico-cultural orientation against assumed Muslims and assigned women.

Asghar refers to her mother's voice as "strange," pulling her from slumber with its foreignness. This adjective functions two-fold within the poem. Firstly, it notes the act of forgetting that is inherent to the passage of time. While the mother's ghost is always haunting, her hands, her voice, her corporeality are gradually forgotten. Lost, just as she is lost to Asghar. Secondly, the strangeness of the voice speaks to its foreignness, its otherness in the diasporic space. Accented voices are inexplicably both silenced and separated from what is imagined as normal. Individuals raised primarily in the diaspora will likely reflect the accented norms of their

point of landing, making the accented speech of the mother, presumably that of the motherland, foreign.

Finally, Asghar tentatively releases the reader from the grip of the poem. Despite the poem's closing, the weight of it continues to haunt us:

in the kitchen. Kal means  
she's holding my unborn baby  
in her arms, helping me pick a name. (Asghar 11)

The stanza begins by placing the mother "in the kitchen," a space connoted with child-rearing and assigned to women (Nainar 1). Again, Asghar reminds the reader of the womanized perspective and the expectations imposed thereon by patriarchal and neo/colonial forces. In the final sentence of the poem, occupying space on all three lines of the final stanza, Asghar engages her self-determination, her agency. She embraces the notion of motherhood, projecting an "unborn baby" into her future. An imagined future being the only space in which Asghar, her child, and her mother are able to be together. By exploring her potential for reproductive futurity, Asghar positions herself to take the place of her lost mother. "her arms," presumably the mother's, become Asghar's own. She offers the ghostly presence of her absent mother closure by

recognizing her valued influence and the expectations she had left behind, assuming them on her behalf.

Closing the poem with Asghar's mother "helping me pick a name." leaves the reader with an indefinite vision of Asghar's imagined future, as is the imagined future of communities trapped in the cultural liminality of diaspora. The unborn baby that is this future, shared under mutually recognized subjectivity under and against various overlaid and intersecting marginalizations, is developed by this diasporic community. Similar to Asghar in the poem, effectively left to their own devices under the ghostly burden of loss and displacement, the community must function uniquely to pursue "not the rediscovery but the *production* of identity" (Hall 235). The onus of producing and maintaining a diasporic cultural identity is therefore recognized as falling on those functioning under diaspora. Aligning the diasporic community with the same responsibility that has historically been lost with the absented motherland. This practice can be cathartic for diasporic folks by no longer hinging the validity of a cultural identity with a pilgrimage or an essentialist consideration of what it means to be of a particular

identity. By way of this alignment, the haunting presence of the motherland is offered the potential to dissolve - finally, hopefully, to be at rest.

While narratives and performances of diasporic identity are often rooted in a ghostly call from one's cultural motherland and the laborious act of seeking and navigating a community that exists only in relation to and often under a dominant national consciousness, Asghar's poem, *Kal*, offers us an alternative. By unpacking her sense of longing for an absented and haunting mother-figure, she suggests exercising agency against the bindings of diaspora and instead developing a cultural identity of and for the self. This acknowledges the overlapping *présences* developed and set forth by Stuart Hall in producing a cultural identity in any given moment and recognizing it as functionally multi-faceted. A diasporic individual is not frozen in time as the individuals they were and the identities they carried at the moment of displacement, but are continuously influenced by the cultural spaces they navigate in their respective futures.

Developing a cultural or community identity can therefore be understood as being even more difficult under



diaspora than it might already have been in the motherland. Hall and Asghar therefore push us towards a certain fluidity with regards to developing a sense of self and allowing it to be informed by a community we identify with. This alignment could be as abstract as sharing the sheer fact of diaspora, in recognizing for oneself and one another that identity in such conditions means identity is constantly becoming, continuously being produced and reproduced through the constant influence of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

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To Those Who've Made the Mistake of Loving Me

i'm sorry