

Family Communication as... Object

Family as Material Memory

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Family as Material Memory: A Reading Preamble

Our homes and our family lives are littered with objects. Or it might be correct to say that we live in an object-saturated world. We live with objects and they live with, and sometimes in, us. We carry some objects along, stumble upon others, and get rid of many along the way. Objects have practical uses, symbolic functions, and social meaning (Candlin and Raiford 2009). Since the 1970s, material culture has been taken up with renewed and robust interest in various social research disciplines. However, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) argues that ethnographic discussions of material culture have privileged culture over the material world. Ethnographers address the discursive, relational, embodied, and symbolic nature of culture in the lives they study, but most often relegate to marginal/peripheral analysis the intricate role that things-objects play in our everyday lives.

My own interest in objects and family emerged from oral history fieldwork with Partition refugee families. The Partition is the name given to the catastrophic event that led to the religious division of India into secular Indian and Islamic Pakistan. One million people died in the communal riots that ensued and 20 million were displaced on both sides of the border. In their oral histories, my participants often told stories of their lost homes by remembering lost objects, lamenting their absence, and resurrecting them during our recordings. Many others took me around their homes to show me objects that had survived the treacherous and dangerous displacement. In my book from this fieldwork, *Home, Uprooted*, objects remained ancillary to my interpretations of my participants' stories, because for most Partition families very few objects from the past remain (Chawla 2014). I wrote about objects without consciously acknowledging that I was writing about material culture and its relationship with identity.

“Some/thing” about objects must have stuck to me because soon after I found myself writing essays on moving and movable objects that shape refugee stories. More importantly, I turned

inward to write about objects that trailed along with my own refugee family, who also made the forced migration from Pakistan to India in 1947. Similar to refugees in my study, I grew up in a home with few objects from the old world. We cannot claim heirlooms, old furniture, china, or silver, past one generation. Even so, there are traces of another life in small trinkets, boxes, and memories of objects. As I traced these familial things, I ventured even further inward and began considering objects that I, as an immigrant (by choice) in the US since 1997, carry back and forth in my trips to the Indian subcontinent. For four years now, I have been creating an inventory of my own ordinary objects and writing short (textual) pieces about objects, habits, and their attendant affects to explore family life, migration, identity, and home-making.

A few of these objects are the subject of the memoir essay that follows this preamble. In this piece, I invoke the word *nishani*—a Hindustani word that can loosely be translated into remembrance or reminder—to enact my relationship with objects that belong to and come from my mother, a mother emotionally close, but geographically distant in a separate continent from me, for over two decades. I show how a painting, a box, a ruby and diamond ring belonging to my mother, and lace doile's handmade by her enact *affective secrets* and open up *affective atmospheres*. Not so much longing or belonging, they represent and embody past and future losses, secrets, and Other worlds, both connecting me and disconnecting me from my mother.

Nishani and Mother Objects

In December 2005, a few days before my wedding, my mother, Amma, gave me a 22-carat-gold *kada*, bracelet. Placing it in my hand, she said, *Yeh Biji ki nishani hai, Quetta mein banwai thi*, this is your grandmother's, she had it made in Quetta. My paternal grandmother Biji had been gone for 7 years. By the time I got married, the youngest grandchild and the last to be wed, all her gold, what she brought from Pakistan to India in 1947, what fed and sustained the family, what was used in the weddings of a number of relatives, was mostly depleted. This bracelet was one of the pieces that remained—a most familiar *nishani*.

Nishani is a difficult Hindustani word to translate into English. At best, it means remembrance or reminder, but the English translation erases the affective qualities of the word, which in Hindustani almost fuses the person with the thing. Biji owned a pair those *kadas* and wore one on each wrist, and like many women of her generation, she never left the house bare-wristed. A few years ago, I asked Amma if I could convert the *kada* into something wearable since Biji's was an old-fashioned design. Amma became overcome with emotion saying, This is Biji's *nishani*, keep it as it is.

Nishani, both the word and the feeling, gives an object a trace of “being-ness” a kind of personhood that the word remembrance or even memento fails to capture. More than symbol, it carries with it the trace of a person, so much so that melting the bracelet would mean a kind of symbolic death, a death of the fusion of memory and the person. A few months later Amma gifted me a contemporary gold bracelet, adding in a way to gold jewelry that I have inherited from her, her own *nishani*.

As a child of refugees and as a self-propelled migrant to the US, the objects I carry (or those that carry me) have been holding my attention for some decades now. Why, I ask myself, did I carry with me three books—*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Isla Negra* by Pablo Neruda and

Ways of Seeing by John Berger—when I moved to the United States in 1997? This journey took place exactly 50 years after my paternal grandparents and their son, my father, and his siblings made their forced journey from newly-formed Pakistan where they belonged, to independent India, in 1947. It was not until I became involved in collecting oral histories of cross-generational Partition refugees in 2007 that I started to pay close attention to objects—those present and absent, those real and imagined, and those resurrected—that surround my life.

No different from refugees across the world, I grew up in a home with but a handful of objects from the old world. My family cannot claim heirlooms past one generation. There are, however, traces of another life in small trinkets like the *kada*. Even the smallest things can become more than themselves because we “persuade inanimate objects to be partners in our experience.” (Busch 2005) It’s as if we begin to belong to the thing as much as the thing belongs to us. When an object attaches itself to a person, family, or place, it becomes imbued with affective qualities of happiness and unhappiness, anger or ambivalence (Ahmed, 2010).

I

It is the first image that greets visitors when they enter my home in Athens, Ohio.¹ As paintings go, it is nothing spectacular. I purchased the print in 2005 for 80 rupees (or about \$1.50) at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. It shows an old lady in a *salwar kameez*—the long shirt and trousers worn by Punjabi women—sitting sideways on a *charpoy* (a frame strung with rope, a bedstead), knitting in the afternoon sun. Her expression is pensive, lonesome. Four black crows hover around the charpoy; some look away, others seem to inspect her mood. The Indian artist Anjolie Ela Menon has entitled this work *Mataji, Grandma*, portraying her as a refugee who

¹ Discussions and some of the writing about the box and painting appear in my book, *Home, Uprooted*.

daydreams of her home in Lahore, lost to her by India's Partition. Even to strangers who don't know the story behind the portrait, Mataji's sorrow is palpable.

Diagonally across from the painting, near a corner window in the living room, stands a small table that was originally meant to hold a houseplant. On it I have placed a small, hand-sized, rectangular trunk-shaped metal box that has seen better days. It belonged to Biji. Intricately decorated in maroon, black, and gold, it is an ornamental keepsake box that had a key for its built-in lock. The Taj Mahal, a symbol of Moghul architectural splendor, is captured in miniature on the lid, and can only be seen when peering at the box from the top. The bottom offers a clue to the box's origins with the stamp "English Make."

An inexpensive tourist trinket representing the Empire's length and breadth, it was probably sold with some pride within India and other British colonies. The Taj's British ownership is stamped on the bottom, showing—symbolically and literally—that the imperial power could mass-produce a symbol of Empire in any form it desired. As a child, I wanted the box because the box had a lock and key, making it a potential holder of secrets and treasures. I wanted it too because the English Make label made it a British object. Like most children who grew up in post-independence India I was encouraged to embrace Britishness in my speech and mannerisms. This object was *bona fide* English and made me feel a part of the Raj. Now, as a grown up, I wanted it because it belonged to Biji and was a material symbol of my family's politically impelled migrations.

The painting has a different story. My mother bought the print at an exhibit because it reminded her of her in-laws who fled Pakistan. I think it also reminded her of her own displacements, which were smaller, but felt nonetheless. Amma, born and raised in Delhi in an independent India, has never experienced forced migration. But she married my father, whose life had been defined by his family's refugee status; he embraced effortlessly a nomadic sort of corporate

life as a management professional, moving us from Indian state to Indian state for better prospects, new experiences. Even though Amma was a willing traveler, she longed to return to Delhi, where she was born and where she grew up. The years spent away from her birthplace—the 1970s and 1980s—were an unplanned detour and she only came fully alive on her short visits home each year. It was from her that I learned to miss Delhi, just as it was from Biji that I learned to miss the old country—both places that I cannot rightfully claim as home. After leaving Quetta, Biji never fully experienced at-homeness in the new country that came to house her. She was not unhappy; she just remained without anchor. In 1990, my father returned my mother and us to Delhi, and Amma remains there—happy, anchored. In 1997, fifty years after my family fled Pakistan, I left India, hoping to return; but here I am, a new citizen of the United States, anchored to an existential notion of home as an everywhere and nowhere place. Bringing *Mataji* and the Taj Mahal box into my house in Ohio seemed crucial—as symbol of inherited filial longings—*Nishanis* as mother objects.

II

Knotting or tatting is a craft that has colonial origins. In India, this kind of lace is and was always a product and object of Empire. Objects in the form of doilies that I have in my home in Appalachian Ohio. They have traveled here, circuitously, as *Nishanis*.

The doilies came into my possession around the days of my wedding. While weddings are a rite of passage in all cultures, among Punjabi's in north India and possibly much of India, the wedding is a symbolic end of a woman's life with her parents in her natal home. After a wedding, a sense of melancholia envelops the bride's home, as if a child has died. And in some real ways, it is symbolic death. On the days following my December 25th wedding, the house was still decorated with flowers, there was bright *mehndi* (henna) on the hands of all women, and *Mithai* (sweet meats) were stacked on the dining table. Still, there was a sense of completion, an end, and so of loss. On New Year's eve, Amma called me to her room.

As she has aged, my mother has become more deliberate, thoughtful, and subdued. I am still unused to her stillness, so different from her feisty days as a young mother. Her quiet that day echoed the atmosphere that encompassed our home. She sat down on her bed and opened a cloth bag from which she removed another muslin wrap. She told me to look at what was inside. Joining her on the bed, I unwrapped the package to find different colors, shapes, and sizes of tatted doilies, coasters, and a table runner. I looked at Amma quizzically and said, 'These are yours, I saw you tating these when I was in school and others later on. Yes, she said, I've been saving them for your *trousseau*.

As far back as I can recall, Amma embroidered beautiful handkerchiefs with delicately tatted lace edgings for her friends' daughters when they were getting married. The hankies were mostly white with intricate embroidery in one corner and delicate lace on the edgings. They were always accompanied by doilies. Amma would place all the pieces in beautifully embroidered fabric bags, also handmade by her, and gift them a few days before the wedding.

This was unusual practice among Punjabis. The word *trousseau* is French for the bridal gifts—clothes, jewelry, and linen—that accompanied the bride. When I got married, I had been living alone in the US for close to a decade. I was already running a small household. So, in some ways, the linen gifts in a *trousseau* were a formality. I did not expect or want a *trousseau* because I've also always considered it a burden that a woman's family has to bear. I was also uncomfortably aware that tating or knotting, as the British called it, entered Amma's world through the English who brought it to India and normalized it as a craft that women learned to pass the time. Not all Indian women knew or could tat, but my mother does.

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There were three sets of doilies in blue, peach, and beige, and a beige table runner. I remarked how difficult it was to make them and how intricate they were and are. Changing the

topic, Amma said, You were so good at tatting and you learned it so quickly, but you've never really stayed with it. I rolled my eyes replying, But Amma, I only learned because you wanted me to. It's an old-fashioned habit that your generation wanted to continue. It is very colonial too, you know? Unsatisfied with my answer, but not offended by my words because she is my mother, Amma said, Most people cannot get the hang of it and you picked it up so fast, one must use such talent, a shuttle is not easy to use.

Yes, it is hard to learn how to tat, but somehow it was easy for me. Over the course of a few weeks, one summer when I was a pre-teen, I successfully navigated the clicks needed to maneuver the shuttle. I should remember the exact moment when this happened and where we were, what thread I was using, but all I remember is Amma's victorious smile in having managed to teach me.

As I sat there on the bed with Amma, I thought of how I made lace edgings for a few of her *trousseau* gifts. It was a source of much pride for Amma to tell her friends that her 12 year-old-daughter could make lace. That same summer Amma also allowed me to keep one of her embroidered handkerchiefs on the condition that I would make the purple lace around it, to practice my edgings. That handkerchief also sits in a small cloth bag in my dresser drawer here, in Ohio.

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Amma opened all the pieces of lace and laid them out on the bed. We inspected them one by one. We were quiet. Amma gently wrapped the pieces in the muslin cloth, placed them back into the cotton bag, and put it in front of me. She solemnly said, *Yeh meri Nishaani hai, theek se rakhna*, This is my *Nishani*, keep it properly.

And just like that the atmosphere, already laden with post-wedding melancholia, acquired an aura of somber finished-ness. Unready for such completion, I chose anger. I scolded Amma for using the word *Nishani*, asking her why she was associating it with herself because it felt as if she had delivered an ending. To herself. To us.

Amma, I muttered, Why are you talking like you are going anywhere? And, I'm not taking these anyway; these are hardly something I will use in Ohio. Amma smiled saying, You are going to take these. I know you don't want to take all the jewelry, but these are not staying here.

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Since 2005, the doilies have lain in a linen cupboard in my kitchen in Ohio. I keep them in the same bag and muslin cloth in which Amma presented them to me. I take them out a few times a year, iron them with a cool iron, moistening them so they lie smoothly on a flat surface. I place the runner on the dining table on *Diwali* and take a picture for Amma, who is delighted to see them; she thinks I must use them, at least sometimes.

I could tell you that I take them out because I want to see them because I miss my mother. But it's the inverse. I dread taking them out because in them is gathered the affective atmosphere of that moment when my mother declared them, christened them, a *Nishani*. These objects, intricately crafted by my mother's hands, have become fused with the moment I received them. A finished-ness grips that moment of leaving on that December day. A finishedness for which I am ill-prepared. I keep them hidden because to see them is to give a past-ness to my mother, both real and unreal. The past-ness is palpable, but Amma is still there, a phone-call away.

As an object of history, these doilies are a socio-political curiosity for me. These objects date back to 17th century England where knotting was storied as a feminine pastime. The craft entered India with the British *memsahibs*, but came to be called tatting owing to the popularity of American women's magazines in the early 60s, the decade when my mother was coming of age. Amma is proud to have been born in November 1947, five months after India became free from colonial rule. She loses no opportunity to tell us that she was never a British subject and was born free. And yet, after her marriage when she lived with my father in a small town in the north Indian state of Punjab, she became an expert tatter, a favorite afternoon pastime of colonial wives. The doilies, now in my

home in Appalachian Ohio—by itself an Other space in America, a forgotten space—lie folded under the weight of these scattered migrations, travels, and colonialisms.

These doilies fused with the labor of my mother's fingers and fused with the moment when they were gifted to me are performative objects; they repeat a situation. And yet, the colonized subject never really repeats. The colonized subject takes what she can and makes it her own—almost the same, but not quite. By making these doilies into a *Nishani*, my Amma, a free-citizen of India, has unknowingly domesticated (some might say recolonized) this history. In making it a *Nishani* she strips the object of its colonial past. She makes it hers, so that I can make it mine. And yet, I keep them hidden.

III

In 1985, my father gifted my mother a set of ruby and diamond earrings accompanied by a matching ring, a 15th wedding anniversary gift. We were on a road trip. I was not yet 11 years old. At night, in the hotel, Amma removed the earrings and rolled them onto a tissue paper to store them in her purse. In the morning, we stopped at a Sikh temple, *gurudwara*, called Ponta Sahib, on our way to a hill station on the foothills of the Himalayas. We parked, removed our shoes, washed our hands and feet, and went in to do the *darshan*. We viewed the Sikh holy book and listened to devotional songs.

Afterwards, we sauntered around the temple grounds. At the parking lot, Amma furiously motioned me to her. When I was close, in a nervous and rushed whisper, she told me she could not find the ruby earrings. Shocked, I whispered, But they were in your purse. She whispered back urgently, I must have used the tissue in which I wrapped them!

I'm unsure how I managed to not make a sound. This was serious. She had been lovingly wearing the earrings since their anniversary a few months earlier. I knew that making my father aware of what just occurred would unleash a new set of problems for all of us. He would get mad, he would scold Amma, because after all it was his gift to her. Papa is not an unkind man, but during

stressful moments, he hits out, blames the world, blames us. I worried he would blame the road trip and my childish brain wondered, would he cut it short?

Amma and I were silent. The road trip continued, haunted by the loss and the secret. We came home to the town of Moga in Punjab, a north Indian state, where we lived at the time. We never spoke of the earrings. Sometimes, I would see the ring on Amma's finger. She would try not to draw attention to it. Years passed. I almost forgot the ring it existed.

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Once, when I was in my late twenties and visiting home from the US, Amma handed me the ruby and diamond ring, the remnant of the set. She said the arthritis in her fingers did not allow her to wear the ring any more. She handed it to me in haste, as if she had been waiting for me to be old enough to take charge of it. I know the ring sat heavy on her fingers ever since the loss of the earrings. Because my father still does not know.

The earrings have now been lost for 33 years. I have often wondered if they were just thrown out with the trash in the bin in which they landed along with the tissues. I wonder if someone found them. And if they did, did they think they were real? Did they keep them or sell them? Things have an afterlife, after all.

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In Fall 2017, I am teaching a seminar on objects and their place in our lives. On this day, we are reading about artist Helen Jaksch's (2013) photographic project "The Empty Chair Is Not So Empty." Jaksch photographed empty and abandoned chairs in New Orleans and surrounding areas in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The chairs signify, among many other things, memory and loss. The chair as object, holds ghosts, past bodies, stories—a life. An empty chair is never empty.

Serendipitously or subconsciously or deliberately—I will never know—I am wearing my ruby red silk blouse and therefore the ruby ring on my finger that day. I have asked everyone to talk

about an object and its performative relevance in their lives. When we have shared these stories, the students ask me to share one object from my life. And as if the moment has arranged itself, I point to the ring and tell this story to an audience for the first time.

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I don't think the ring is particularly beautiful. It isn't my style. Still, I wear it lovingly and guard it because it belongs to my mother. In wearing the ring, I wear a secret. The moment and the object are fused into an *affective secret*. The loss of the earrings is a rite of passage for me. It is the first time my mother entrusts me with knowledge, a secret that only she and I hold. The moment transforms me because it marks the first time I am invited as an adult into the company of women—a place, a space, and an idea, in which secrets are told and held, and sometimes released. This company is an affective space that provides some respite, even for a little while, from the travails of a patriarchal, often cruel and unfeeling world. We, women, keep secrets for so many reasons, secrets that might destroy us, but that can also save our lives. At that time, for my mother and I, it was the wrath of my father.

I keep the ring carefully in a box within a box on my dresser, a deliberate cocooning to guard against loss, assuring myself that it will not meet the fate of the earrings. This cocooning ensconces the ring and I, yet again, in that moment with my mother—performing, guarding, and containing that secret. The ring is now more than itself. It is a *Nishani*.

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