



Queer
Muslim
Futures

a collection of visions, utopias & dreams

curator's note

I woke up this morning and read *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. A powerful story of a woman dreaming up an alternate future, where women are free to achieve their fullest potential. Published in 1902, the story speaks to the power of imagination and the radical potential it holds for those that are too often deprived of a voice. I connected with Hossain's story in more ways than one. Growing up in a lower-middle class, Muslim home in northeast India, I had to resort to 'silence' as a means of survival for a substantial part of my life. And then when I had found the vocabulary to navigate my sexual identity in a metro city, the realization of modern Indian 'Muslimhood' dawned upon me.

I realized the frames through which some of us are seen- as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or Muslim- are painfully limited. Oftentimes, we are just characters in other people's stories, with no agency or voice. This publication emerges out of a three-part workshop series- organized by *The Queer Muslim Project* with *Fearless Collective* in September 2020- to enable queer Muslim participants from across South Asia to imagine the safe and sacred futures we wish to inhabit and to craft our own stories and utopias.

This book draws from the workshop but is not a documentation of the workshop, as such. It carries fragments of our individual and collective imagination of a Queer Muslim Future. Written and compiled by Maniza Khalid and illustrated by Reya Ahmed from *The Queer Muslim Project*, this book is a celebration of queer Muslims around the world who dare to dream.

I wish to thank the wonderful team at *Fearless*- Shilo, Gayatri, Josephine, Tehani-, our very dear friends Sabika Abbas Naqvi (*Sar-e Rehguzar*), Sarah Naqvi, and our motley group of lovers, healers, and poets that took part in the workshop and contributed their poetry and art to this endeavour. Special thanks to *Planet Romeo Foundation* for supporting our work.

Rafiul
[*The Queer Muslim Project*](#)

*Written & Compiled by Maniza Khalid
Illustrated by Reya Ahmed*

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The Arrival

The Trinity await the arrival of the Timeless. They were here.



We assemble here, in the name of Love, most hopeful, most merciful...

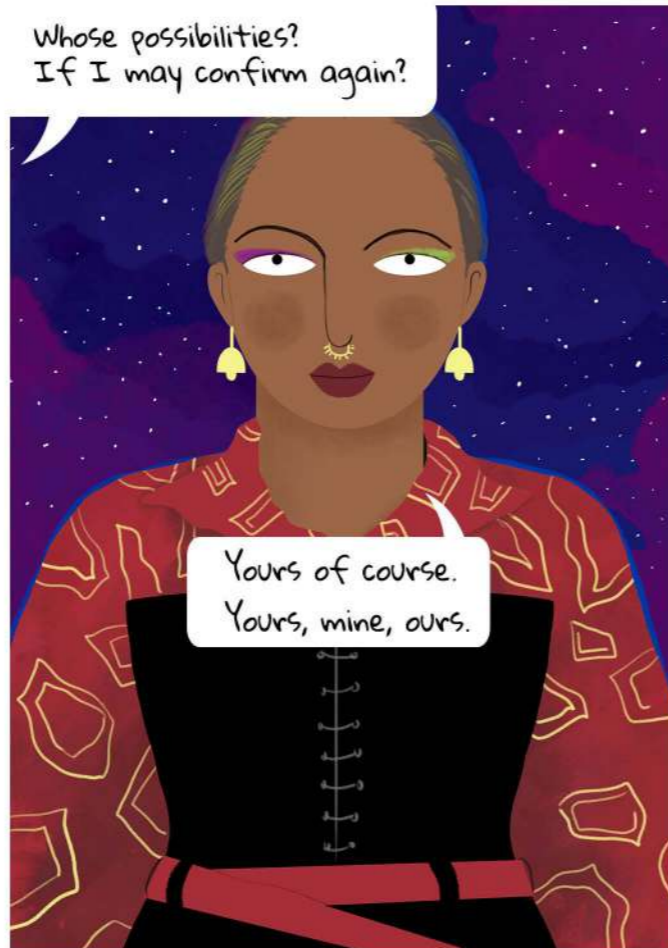


As the Timeless Ones we must see to the sowing of dreams!

We speak of possibilities, the most desirable, most yearned for...



Whose possibilities?
If I may confirm again?



Yours of course.
Yours, mine, ours.

Fluid, ecstatic, fruit-laden,
various, Queer & Muslim



What will grow from these dreams?
Even the Timeless ones know not



Queer Muslim Futures will be realized.
For now we shall explore potential.





Here is what could have been - the stories of Queer Muslims make their way to us as beams of light do, unwavering and ancient. Instead, the fog of erasure deprived us of them. We are left with blurred, forgotten stories, dimmed by ages of censorship, oft times complete obliteration. For centuries we have yearned to connect with our true selves and with each other. The light of Gay, Lesbian, Trans, and Ace Muslim histories rests in pale and indistinct forms.

The potential of our future rests on them, and so, definitive action is necessary. The facilitators and the dreamers of futures set out on a mission. They called for Queer Muslims to come together, share their visions.

To be realized, the future needs to be made tangible. Conversations with Queer Muslims are to be grounded in their own experiences. Ambitions have contexts; hopes belong to dreamers; desires have a scent...



The Politics of Smell

The future has a smell. How easy it is to forget an all-pervasive sense - scent. A reimagining of the future must figure smell, our engagement with it, to explore more deeply what can be, what will be, what ought to be. Facilitators opened the question to the community, and a passionate conversation ensued.

A dear one spoke of their affiliation with undesired smells, in a district where great lengths must be crossed to procure water, their labor intensified by the city's heat. What comes of those who must toil to live through each day? If it is necessary to traverse forsaken parts of a city, the scent of neglect clings onto travelers too. Once we acknowledge the essential connection between access to hygiene and luxury, could we unlearn our own biases? The question remains to be explored, yet one cannot help wonder if scent can also heal.

The future must be cognizant of the power of smells to nourish the mind. The conversation among dreamers at the workshop brought to notice the use of incense and diffusers at healing centers. The dense aroma of jasmine at bastis could transport the mind to a different plane, one where magic and mysticism coexist. Temples and mosques often use perfumed oils, *itr*, to revere the space itself for prayer is often a means to heal, to so many. We honor the departed at shrines, public or little ones at homes with scented candles. More than honor, it is essential to those doing the honoring, remembering, and coping.

Therapy features fragrances. One's ability to anchor nourishment in scents can influence the self's future. As one recalls that they deserve to be in a welcoming space, a usual means to ensure that is to immerse the self in scents they enjoy. Simple gestures like freshly-brewed cinnamon tea or a dab of rose water can enrich everyday existence. It is no wonder that reimaginings of Queer Muslim Futures include so many flowers, fruit, and perfumes.

Conversates agreed that one's sense of smell is so primal, entirely natural to one's being. The scent of human bodies in relation to ours cannot be underestimated. Love itself smells different to each person. It could be the fragrance of fresh biscuits, a *Nani's* kurta, the sleep-soaked skin of another body, the peculiar smell of cats and dogs, and turtles. The precarious negotiation of attraction, desire, love are based on scent.

The future belongs to us as much as the present does. Even our hopes and desires have their scents. To locate them in possibilities, dreams-yet-be-realized, we confer more vividness to Queer Muslim Futures.

“suspension of disbelief”

We are conditioned to see ourselves through limits set by current systems. Only when we suspend disbelief itself, can we envision futures full of possibilities. Transformation is possible when we allow ourselves to dream. With these cues, Queer Muslims sought different forms of freedom.



Formless



Free of scrutiny



Healing from childhood trauma



Unburdened of productivity



Unshackled from time



Radical softness

Names hold power. As labels, as invocations, as suggestions of one's own purpose, names have been invested with the ability to reinforce ideas. The act of naming, as opposed to the name itself, is fertile with its own potential. The magic of language itself, words so simple as names, perform more functions than only to refer. Names can determine destiny. They can alter the course of futures.

When one does not name something out of hatred or fear, it is threatened by erasure. On the other hand, magnanimity is symbolized by many names - *Allah* has 99 names. When one loves something, they confer a name, a formulation of their own affection onto them. What comes of us when we love ourselves enough to rename ourselves? Could we be so various that we have more than one name?

Queer Muslims reconsidered renaming themselves. Some expressed disdain at gendered names; those based on mythological women whose role was mainly wife to male authority; names gendered by widespread usage; names gendered by meaning. Some admitted to the burden of carrying their fathers' names. This patriarchal tradition of naming was further disavowed by unhealthy relationships between the father and child, not uncommon among many queer individuals.

Renaming the self could be empowering to the self of the future through many methods. Some people decided to reclaim their fathers' names and color it with their own meaning. Some agreed that they would renounce it, to toss away all influence of carrying a legacy they did not connect with. Some from the community decided that they can be a collection of names they revere, for why must one limit the self to syllables that White authorities can pronounce? Syllables of one's name could be a reflection of their mother tongue if they so desired it.

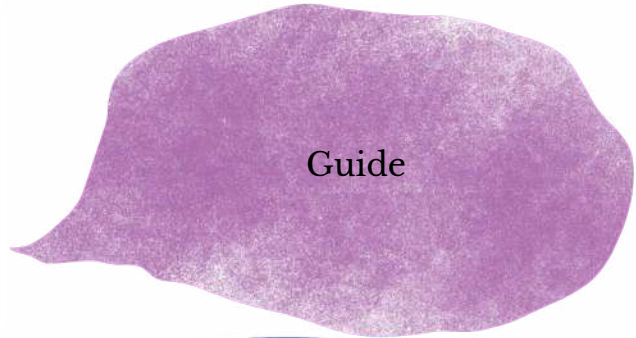
Names can signal to alternate avatars. Some chose to include their designation as part of their new name to subvert assumptions of power through the discussion. For instance, in a reimagining of the future, a female-aligned prophet and her existence is an ode to women saints. A lover decided to be a collection of the names of people who are dear to her. Another decided that he wanted his actual name, rarely enunciated in his daily interactions, followed by his middle name and the father's name. Some chose to cast away gender, to pick ambiguous names to express their own fluidity. It was agreed that one's own name can function as anthems of the self. With this exercise in renaming, we were propelled further into a future that we wanted to make our own.

Renaming

Occupations of The Future

In your Queer Muslim Future, who do you want to be?


The floating question invited many possibilities.




Guide




Shadow Worker



Decolonized



A light creature



A Mountain Range



Poet



When they walk to their desk, the blooms can't help but respond to their presence. Satin petals, waxen leaves, some petals arranged like an explosion of spindles, the defense of thorns, all of these are known to the florist. They do not tame but instead tend to these floral wonders. No matter the weather, the humidity, their careful hands hold the soil with reverence as it is the stuff of life. Their flowers exist in all shapes, some on stalks reaching for the sky and some grounded as homely ones often are. The florist knows that flowers come in multitudes; they are to be nourished accordingly. Once, a sweet old lady watched them cup a bloom and whisper sweetly to it.

The Florist

She often buys flowers from the florist's. She acknowledges everyone for their craft, their vocation and dreams. Most know her for her magic - it is welcoming and sweet. For centuries she had been regarded with hostility by the narratives of angry men who wish to see the world in binaries. Baba Yaga, Chudail, Swallower-of-children, heretic, hateful spinster, old hag, they had called her. What they didn't know was that she always brewed honeyed concoctions for the forsaken, indulged children with rasgullas. The scent of rusks wafted from her cottage and there was often a cup of cardamom chai at her room's windowsill. It's how you knew she had a guest at home.

Queer Nāani





Like everyone else, she needed breaks during study sessions. She drinks cardamom tea at a candied house and then walks back to the library, able to form new connections in her mind. A pensive, brooding figure she seemed and yet all her research was for love - the love of knowledge, the love of queerness, the love she had for their work. All her life, she wanted to contribute to Queer Muslim scholarship. Her hands had leafed through manuscripts in Arabic, Indonesian, Chinese and all the languages her community, those she was connected to, spoke in. So extensive is her knowledge that often, practitioners of other skills, even medicine, consult her for her expertise of historical rituals.

The Scholar

The healer connects with their practice essentially through two means - frequent consultations with researchers to build on preexisting knowledge of healing, and conversations with neighbors, to acquaint oneself with the needs of the community. Everyone deserves the chance to heal, a philosophy that motivated their work, led them to a curious variety of concoctions. There is a delicate balance between the preparation and consumption of some of the vials; the willingness to cure must also be met with the willingness to heal. Medicine can never be forced on one. The healer prepares their elixirs with utmost precision. Moonbeams and slanting sun rays are ingredients to some potions. The silhouette of the healer often is sighted under the moon on an open field, under the sapphire sky.

The Healer





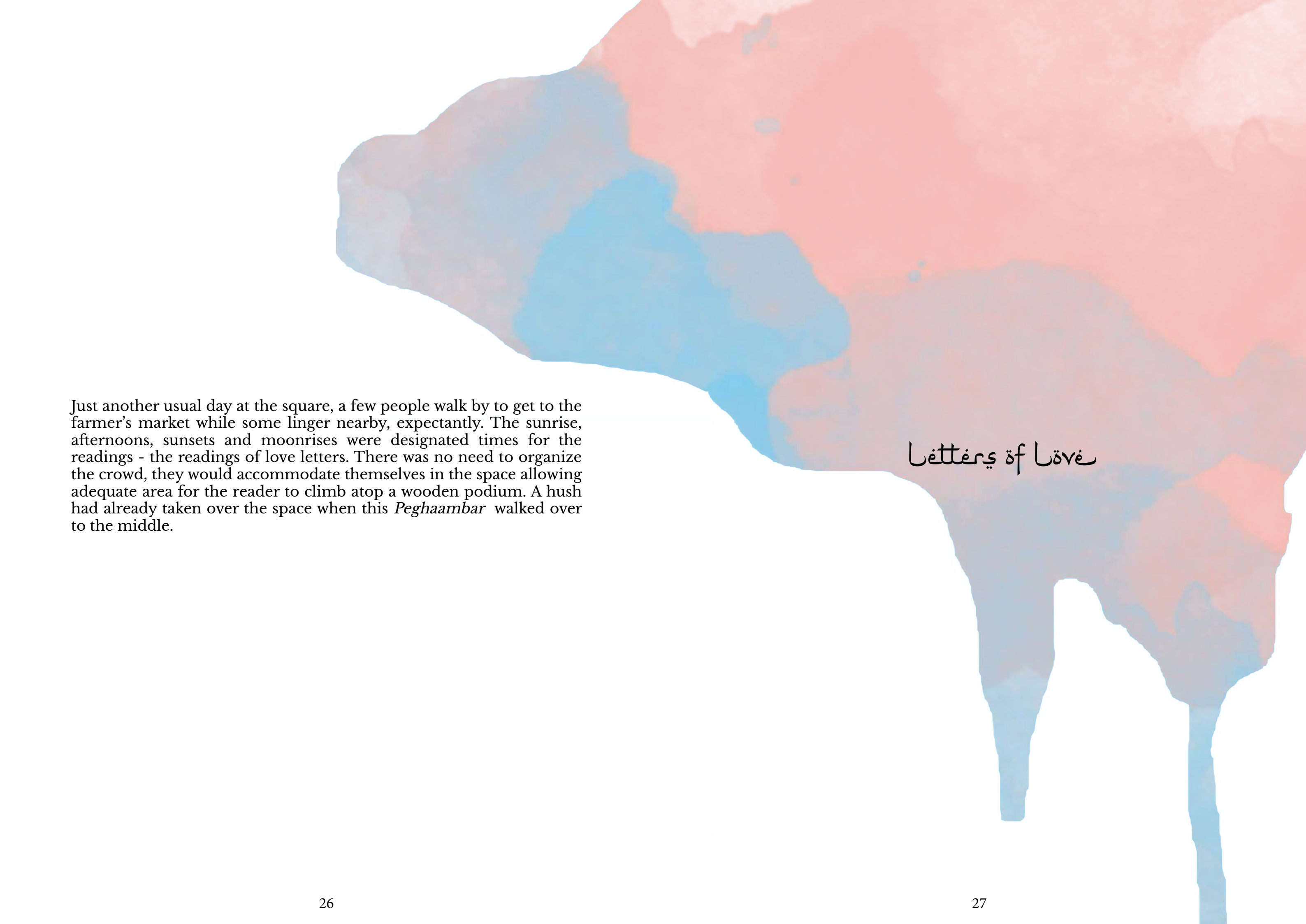
Dance enables new sensations in the body but often tires the muscles, hardens strained ligaments. So, the *Apsara* visits the healer for soothing balms and tends to his body, the precious medium of his art, under the night sky. This is a devotion, an *ibaadat* for him; his movements are an ode to all his blessings - cherished beloveds, the earth, the sashaying of leaves, the blueness of twilight. So abstract are these motivators yet clear as cloudless skies, in his dance. The smooth transitions between dance poses is mimicked by the breezes of the night. Onlookers believe that he bends the winds. From a distance he seems like light and air, entirely fluid and unbound. Children often whisper stories of sighting a fairy, a sprite in the forest.

The Apsara



It was always an honor. Here, senders of letters could have their words read aloud in a public square if they wanted their words to touch the hearts of their neighbors. These readings were waited upon by all the folk who cared to listen with open hearts. Quite like the *Azaan*, the call for prayer, letters were read, often recited, for feelings always read like poetry. The reader's voice wavered under the passion, the delicate melancholy of some letters. Listeners shed tears for confessions of undying love, forgiveness and longing.

The Pēghāambar



Just another usual day at the square, a few people walk by to get to the farmer's market while some linger nearby, expectantly. The sunrise, afternoons, sunsets and moonrises were designated times for the readings - the readings of love letters. There was no need to organize the crowd, they would accommodate themselves in the space allowing adequate area for the reader to climb atop a wooden podium. A hush had already taken over the space when this *Peghaambar* walked over to the middle.

Letters of Love

Mashook jab badi badtameezi aur be-adbi see unnchi
aawaaz me pooche- “tumhain chahiye Kya?”
Fucking listen no! (sunona meri jaan)
(I stand with the front of my kurta stretched across my
arms begging for love)
YES! I am ashamed to ask for love openly! (Don't make me
make coherent my pain, reducing it to
words)
Talk to me softly (I carry the pain and steel of all women
XX)
DON'T speak to me callously. EVER! (Ek baap hai pehle se)
Yes it is an ultimatum, a transaction even. Prove to me you
love me or leave. (Equal lihaaz)
Don't make me count what all I do in love, in junoon.
What's so surprising about my brilliance? Can your
rationale not fathom the depths of my power?
(Duniya Jaye bhaad me, do you, yes YOU, do you like me,
love me, like to love me?)
Tum bhi to mujhe dekho
Reach out to touch me, to reassure me (to be perhaps be
reassured of me?)
Tell me all of you (seek me out too)
Don't dismiss me (I may be wrong but I'm still yours na?)
Tell me how to love you (I'm a scholar yo)
Be indulgent with me (mujhse to sakti mat barto)
Be malleable for me (mere liye hi to phisalna hai)
Do for me as I do freely for you (why do I even have to ask
for this?)
Be careful with me (love me so I can love you)
Let me love you (shamelessly)
Shayad zyaada bol diya maine (kyun kuch ghalat maang
liya kya?)





dreaming with you!

I often say it's hard for me to
imagine my future
so I'll make an exception
to imagine ours together.

after all these years,
your laugh glittering in the
night rain holding on
to my heart still beating –
you, still dancing

I am more vulnerable than
I've ever been. you make room
for softness to settle amidst
your fiery gusts of wind
billowing beyond our front door

I am better at naming my
feelings and desires. your
compassion exudes the project of
self-making with god. to
be seen, is to be known, is to be loved;
the bounds of being known
reverberate in our bodies
prostrating for the energies of love.

holding on to you is
divine embrace I inch
forward into your chest,
you not letting go;

our bond
like it's never been,
like it's always been

surrender to me, love
for we are always safe in each other.

Ek shaaq pe mera ghar hoga
Us ghar mein
Mera maashooq mere saath hoga
Ek roz jo vaada kiya tha tumse
Wo vaada-i-wafaa nibhaana hoga
Tum duur ho chaahe paas ho mere
Har dhaDkan pe naam tumhara hoga
Ek nanhi khwahish ka nazraana
Tum hi pe waare jaayenge
Ek shaaq pe mera ghar hoga
Us ghar mein mera maashooq
Na ho na sahi
Par uska lams sadaa hoga...

I will have a house on a branch
In that house
Will be my lover with me
The promise that I made to you
That promise of being will be kept
No matter if your far away or close to me
My heartbeats will have your name
A gift of every small wish
I shall give you all of it
I shall have a house on a branch
In that house will be my lover
Or may not be
But their touch shall remain forever...





میری جان تسلیم

ہم امید کرتے ہیں آپ ساتھ خیریت و عافیت ساتھ صحت کے شب و روز گزار رہے ہوں گے۔ ہمارا بھی کچھ یہی حال ہے۔ ہم کو ہر وہ لمحہ جسمیں آپ کا خیال ساتھ ہو زندگی کی جلا بخشتا ہے۔ ہم اپنے شہر میں آپ سے ملنے کی جہد مسلسل کاٹ رہے ہیں۔ فی الحال وقت کے تقاضے کے بغور بہت سارے نجی تقاضے مکمل کر کے آپ کے دروازے پہ پھر سے حاضر ہوں گے اور اس دفع ہم آپ کے ساتھ رہنے کے خواہشمند ہیں۔

آپ کا متمنی و خواہشمند

صرف اور صرف آپ کا

س م ا ر

My dear, Greetings!

I hope you are safe and are enjoying each day & night in good health. Similar is my situation. Each moment in my life that has your thought brightens my life. I am constantly struggling to find time & space in my city, where we can meet. For now, I am trying not to focus on the time lost, rather, as soon as I shall be done with some personal work, I will be at your doorstep in no time.

Yours desiring & wishful,
Yours & only yours
“Seen Meem Alif Re”

S M A R

Dearest,

I did not hope to find you here, waiting for me at the end of time itself. I did not dream, could not imagine, after the trials of each day, every aching moment that you would choose to see me once again.

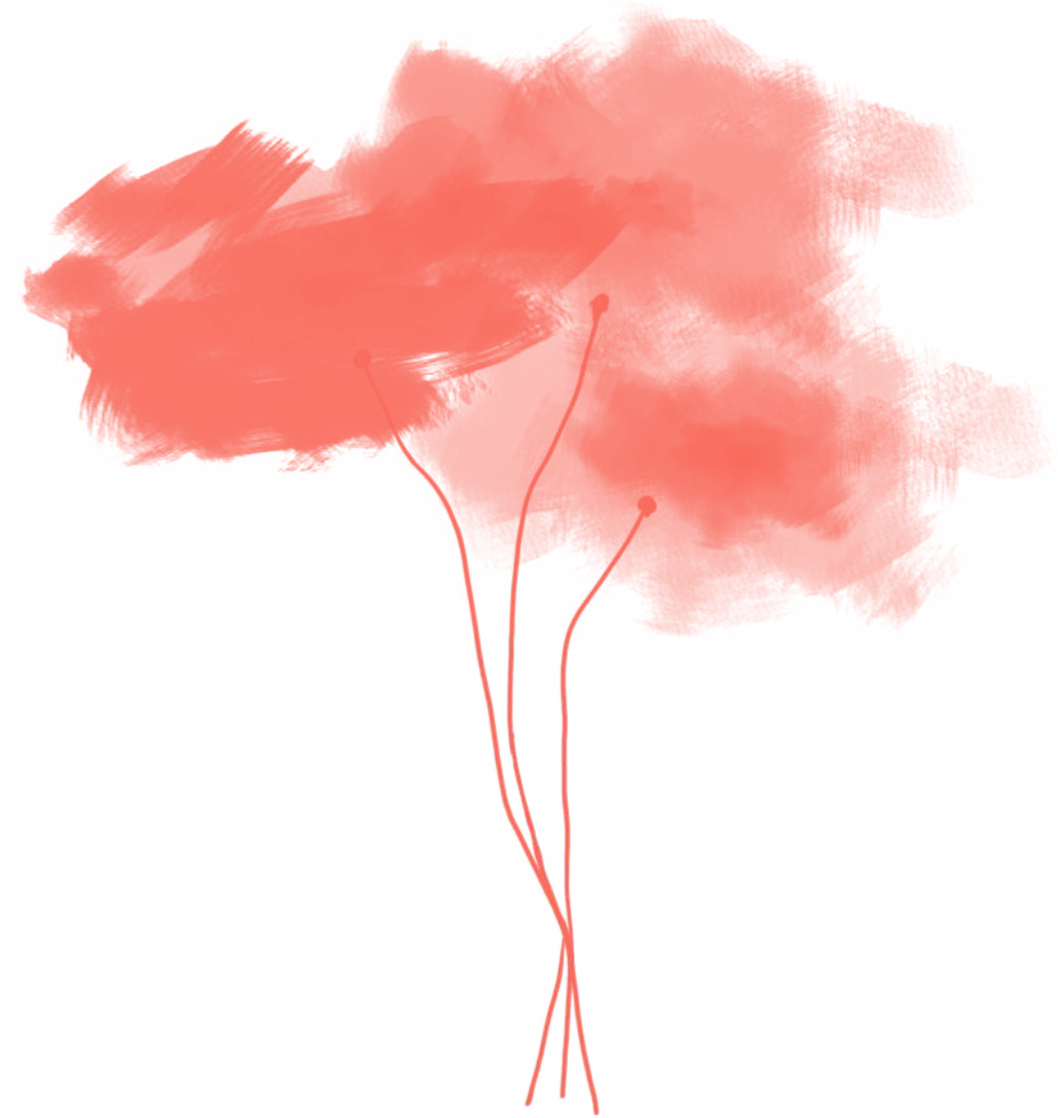
Should you have chosen to forsake me as one chooses to forget drunken mishaps, I would not contest. I would do the same to myself. I have felt shame more than I have ever felt love - it has colored my thoughts a deep crimson, a bloody stain, sometimes renewed to a garish sticky mess when I am in despair again.

I have wanted you to feel at home in my arms, to have you nestle in warmth through winter nights, but to think it was me I couldn't protect you from leaves me wanting and empty again.

I will be kinder, braver and stronger not solely for my own sake but so that you & I can marvel at the world once again. So that tea may taste like the rain, so that mynas return to the our gardens, so that glass-winged dragonflies whirl above our heads like playful thoughts, so that our pajamas may always collect loose cat fur simply because the strays in this ilaaqa return all the love we give to them, so that your wine always sparkles like your eyes when you are enchanted by the world.

I refuse to snub the magic inside us. Never again shall bedrooms and angans be without candles, those little stars in the dark. I'll lay chameli in your tresses spread over pillows; their scent shall linger like remnants of dreams. I trust you to carry the night with you for you have the capacity to hold it. You will never again be alone in what you do. The world with its own rage, may dare to hurt a love that carries the very night, it's shadows and desires. Even then, I will not forsake our life together because I'm burning brighter - a dazzling and smokeless blue, than all the hatred there has ever been.

All of these I promise you. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you for waiting.



'Let us make the self in our own image, after our likeness, and let us have dominion over our own bodies, our own fate, how we love and cherish.' And so they created the self in their own image, as lovers, as dreamers, as artists, as healers. They stand as testimonies of who they wish to be, who they already are.

Portrait of
The Self

Nirwan





نساء

Surkh Mukhannat





*Just like a seed
Through dirt & shadow I grow*

*I don't know where to go,
I'm reaching light through struggle*

Fearless fl.



A Map of Shared Dreams

We dream, not in isolation, but as a collective.

We love by writing messages in the stars.

We talk about controversial content, discuss it in a civil fashion. never will books ever be burned.

Home is in our relationships, not defined by territories we own. and we are all safe with shelter - these can most definitely coincide.

There is commune living where people share and work and rest and love.

There would be no borders ,There are no arms and ammunition, and lynchings. Only rainbow bridges, air that smells of *jannatul-firdaus*.



I am a part of the sea

QUEER MUSLIM MANIFESTO:

1. We are Queer. We are Muslim. The truth of our selves cannot be confiscated from us.

- a. Nothing can usurp that from us, regardless of how we identify as Queer or how we align with Islam.
- b. Our beliefs, practices, negotiations, rituals - personal and community-based, constitute the enormous beings we are.

2. We are Queer. We are Muslim. We exist.

- a. We exist just as the oasis in the desert does. Our existence is as certain as the mountains; our stories reverberate as echoes in the valleys do, our hearts are as deep as the oceans teeming with ideas, lush shoals of emotions.

3. We exist, visibly and also invisibly as djinns do.

Dominant discourses seek to erase us, to render us invisible. We are invoked as absences, undecided and uncertain.

- a. Deliberately and decisively, we shall make our presences known. On purpose, we will engage with a world that refuses to engage with us. We will affect change around us, we will disturb the orders that fog the world with oppressive ideologies.
- b. We will be spoken of and referred to, even in the vocabulary of invisibility.
 - i. If the system does not see us, we will ascertain that our art is seen.
 - ii. If the system does not hear us, we will make our stories heard.

4. We stand against the exploitation of human potential.

- a. Under the guise of encouraging 'innovation', systems that starve the souls of human beings but instead strip them of dignity, shall not have our support.
- b. Under the guise of advancement, systems that feed off the earth unsustainably, shall not have our support.
- c. Instead, we will actively labor to tend to a future that is respectful of human beings and the earth.

5. We stand for love.

- a. We believe in radical softness. We believe in compassion. We protest for love. Our tenderness for earth and all those who tread upon it, is unshaken.
- b. At the face of inhuman systems that flourish on the suffering of the marginalized, we refuse to operate similarly.
- c. We will critique because we love.
- d. We will challenge, because we love.
- e. We will fight because we love.

the team

Maniza is a graduate in literature but cares more specifically about sapphic representation in visual cultures, currently resides in New Delhi, bakes fine basbousa and biscottis, still has not understood what “yeet” was all about but loves the fluidity of language and vapowave culture.



Maniza Khalid



Reya Ahmed

Reya is a Kolkata-based visual artist exploring feminism, queer identity and her experiences of growing up in a Bengali-Muslim household through an interdisciplinary crossroad of illustration, animation, architectural and editorial design. Before the pandemic, she could be spotted mostly at cafes- drawing strangers from a distance.

Rafiq is a



[*The Queer Muslim Project*](#) is one of the largest youth-led online networks of LGBTQIA+ Muslims, with a global community of over 22,000 people and counting. We work to equip LGBTQIA+ persons with the skills necessary to challenge existing narratives of fear and stigma around their bodies and identities through digital storytelling, inclusive faith-based dialogue, identifying suitable legal and mental health support, and creating safe online and offline spaces.



The Queer Muslim Project

