

Memory, Trauma, and Healing in the Works of Sanchita Islam

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Abstract:

Following a brief biographical introduction, this essay investigates the pivotal function played by memory in the narratives and artistic works of Sanchita Islam, a British multimedia artist of mixed descent who passed away in 2023. Three distinct phases will be distinguished in the artist's engagement with memory, each corresponding to a different stage of her journey toward self-awareness.

Keywords: healing, marginalized individuals, motherhood, Sanchita Islam, trauma

When I was invited to contribute to this collection of essays, I considered several topics I would have liked to delve into, ranging from the way Indian writers chose to memorialize the 1947 Partition and its painful aftermath to the pivotal role of memory in Mary Shelley's narratives. However, the untimely and tragic death of a young and talented multimedia artist, as well as a dear friend, Sanchita Islam, which occurred on July 3, 2023, has inevitably altered any prior plan. This essay, which also aims to pay tribute to her outstanding creative talent and profound humanity, will be structured as follows: I will first introduce the multi-faceted work of Sanchita Islam; then I will explore the memory function, particularly traumatic memory, played in her life and art, distinguishing three different phases that correspond to the stages of her path towards self-discovery and self-awareness. For Sanchita, in every possible acceptance of the term, art served as a treatment, a means of exposing and healing personal and collective wounds.

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Born in Manchester in 1973 to Bangladeshi parents (even though, later in life, she discovered her lineage was mixed), Sanchita had an unconventional background: she studied at the London School of Economics³, obtained her MA in screenwriting and directing at Hallam University (Sheffield), and completed her education in 1999, at the Chelsea School of Art and Design in London (Marino 2010: 38). In the same year, Sanchita established her own company, *Pigment Explosion*⁴, which developed projects with “a distinctive work ethic, supported by a well-articulated outreach plan” (Marino 2018: 154): she collaborated with marginalized groups and individuals, granting them the opportunity to engage in the creative industry, thus acquiring valuable skills and expertise. It is almost impossible to ascertain the exact extent of her vast and articulate output, as extensive collections of unpublished materials are stored in her flats in Brussels, London, Kuala Lumpur, or in the mailboxes of her close friends, including myself. During her life, she shot sixteen films (presented at international film festivals across the globe), painted several 30-foot-long scrolls featuring text and images, wrote eleven books (both fictional and non-fictional narratives) and seven plays, composed countless poems, took innumerable photographs; besides, the number of paintings, sketches, portraits, and songs she produced is immense. Sanchita’s simultaneous use of diverse and complementary media, including the written word, the camera, black ink, and colours, underscores her intent to examine phenomena from multiple perspectives: her approach sought to capture the full complexity of subjects without favouring any single vantage point, without lapsing into stereotypes and distortions. Despite her Bangladeshi roots, Sanchita remained a nomad all her life, drifting from city to city and never truly finding a place to finally call home. She was drawn to people on the periphery, who might be seen as outsiders or undesirables, qualities that strongly resonated with her. Through her work, she voiced their memories while endowing their traumas (and then her own traumas) with a tangible form.

As Joshua Pederson (2018) has elucidated, focusing on the relationship between narratives and trauma, “it is a widely accepted

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⁴ <http://www.pigmentexplosion.com/site/#/site/>

therapeutic truth that the stories we tell about the catastrophes that beset us – both individual and collective – can be crucial tools for recovery” (97). Geoffrey Hartman (1995) has also observed that, through storytelling, literature, and their evocative power, wounds can be eventually acknowledged and “read” (537). Pictures can also complement the function of the text “by detaining the reader’s gaze, translating the temporal activity of reading into a spatialized experience” (Arnold-de Simine 2018: 150), borrowing Silke Arnold-de Simine’s insightful remark. Moreover, as Susan Sontag (2003) argued, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (71). In the early stages of her career, Sanchita acted as a cultural mediator, employing various artistic means to challenge biases, safeguard cultural heritage, and facilitate communication between the Global North and the Global South. An illustrative example of her work is her thought-provoking 42-minute film entitled *Connecting Faith*, released in 2004, which addresses the traumatic impact of the 9/11 attacks on Muslim communities worldwide, often perceived as a potential threat to Western stability. The film introduces three compelling young Muslim protagonists: Aveen from Dhaka, Nurul from London, and Melati from Kuala Lumpur. Western viewers’ expectations are immediately subverted when Bangladeshi Aven, a fervent Muslim, appears on screen wearing jeans and describing herself as a business administration student coming from a liberal family. Nurul sheds light on the detrimental role of the media in propagating alternative truths, urging viewers not to rely on second-hand opinions about the so-called *Other*. Melati passionately emphasizes the necessity of educating the world about multiculturalism while fostering solidarity and mutual respect among diverse peoples (Marino 2006). As Aasha Mehreen Amin (2004) has noticed, “interest in Islam has certainly intensified after September 11th, often in a negative way. Paranoia about Islam as a terrorism-mongering religion has been perpetuated by Western media bias. Seldom has Islam been portrayed in a positive light in film. Which makes *Connecting Faith* such an important endeavour.”

In 2004, Sanchita Islam also initiated her work with displaced and marginalized individuals to facilitate their emotional recovery by retrieving long-buried, often sorrowful memories. In her volume entitled *Old Meets Young*, for instance, she skilfully employed her camera, drawing implements,

and the written word as instruments of solace, seeking to soothe and recompose the fragile and, frequently, unsteady minds of the elderly people gathered at “St. Hilda’s Bengali Day Centre” off Bethnal Green Road, London. By encouraging them to share their immigration experiences and positioning them as central figures in both narratives and visual representations, she succeeded in drawing them away from the margins (albeit only temporarily) and in paving a path toward relief from depression. As she pointed out in the Foreword to the text,

Making this book has been a journey. I feel privileged to have met the elders at St Hilda’s. I hope that I have done justice to their stories. It was a pleasure to film, draw and photograph each and every one of them. At times it was emotional, I found simply watching the elders a very moving experience and I hope some of that emotion filters into this book (Islam 2004: 5).

Years later, she would further elaborate on the significance of *Old Meets Young* with the following words:

They were first generation Bangladeshis, their stories, their struggles and hardship needed a platform. And when I drew their faces, it was as if everything I needed to know was locked in their wrinkles, their deep penetrative gaze and the melancholy that seemed etched into their skin.⁵

Likewise, in her volume entitled *Hidden* (2005), where words and images once again intertwine, Sanchita dealt with suppressed memories of domestic abuse and sexual violence, the latter being “one of the most likely causes of post-traumatic stress disorder” (Miller 2018: 227), according to Emma Miller. The volume features Asian women in the East End of London who managed to progress despite the harrowing ordeals they faced. The author’s intent is explicitly stated in the Foreword: she wished to “use art and photography as a cathartic means of documentation” (Islam 2005: 5). Her empowering message is equally clear: “Life does not have to stop if you are a victim, life can start again” (Islam 2005: 5).

⁵ This sentence was included in the first draft of “Will We ever Be Good Enough Great Britain?”, an article eventually published on January 15, 2023, in *Global Bangladesh*. It was expunged from the definitive version, which appears considerably shorter.

While investigating other human beings' distressing life events and submerged traumas, Sanchita Islam likely began to unearth her own. After all, the artist concluded *Hidden* with four perturbing self-portraits "to somehow feel closer to the women that ha[d] let [her] into their lives," as she claimed in the final remarks, "to show them a side of personal torment that perhaps we all, as human beings, try to keep hidden" (Islam 2005: 94). In 2003, she was diagnosed with a mental condition, later identified as schizoaffective disorder, characterized by "extreme highs and lows, depression, and at times auditory and visual hallucinations precipitated by the onset of psychosis" (Hambrook 2015), as noted by Colin Hambrook. In "A Portrait of Madness – the Story of Sophie, Mia and Fred," included in the poetry collection entitled *Eternal Pollution of a Dented Mind* (2008), she introduced her readers to the different personas inhabiting her mind, who would become recurrent figures in her work. As Sanchita disclosed in a 2018 interview, "it was a dangerous time and the poems reflected my fractured mental state. And, yes, many of the poems are dark and deal with suicidal ideation, rejection, abuse, sexual objectification and solitude" (Marino 2018: 157-158). Sophie is a dreamer, a slender and delicate *cloud-catcher* who resides in the sky, "a solitary character, roaming and searching and trying to escape the clutches of Fred [or Frederick Vladimir Pucco], who represents the darkness that inhabits all of us" (Marino 2018: 157). Then, there is Mia, the enchanting seductress, the glamorous and flamboyant diva. In the initial lines of the poem, Sanchita distinguishes between those who are "cohesive, composite beings/ integrated with barely any cracks" (Islam 2008: 12) and the people like herself, "the fragmented ones/ the ones that are/ walking broken plates" (Islam 2008: 12). Her numerous and contrasting self-portraits also reveal this multiplicity; as Bootheina Majoul (2022: 83) has argued, they "recall the many selves within herself. She [fought] with many selves within: the mother, the artist, the intellectual, the dreamer, and the painful rebellious woman with many voices."⁶ Indeed, in a recent interview with Ajit Kumar (2022: 94), she described her mind as a "war zone at times."

⁶ The section entitled "Art" of *Pigment Explosion* features many portfolios that include several self-portraits: there is a collection entitled "Mia," another one called "Red Mia Nudes," the "Fred Paintings," and a multi-faceted "Self-portrait."

In 2009, Sanchita Islam experienced her first episode of psychosis, followed by prenatal and post-partum depression and severe sleep deprivation, when both her children, Luca Blue and Senna River (now aged 13 and 10), were born. Poems and prose pieces ascribed to this period linger on feelings of hopelessness, solitude, and abuse (even sexual). Strange and disquieting memories began to surface, even though she could not clearly fathom what was happening in her brain. She somehow rejected her children and brooded on dark thoughts; as she later recollected, “it was terrifying having visions to harm them” (Marino 2018: 159). Even in this case, Art proved remedial: as she underlined in a 2016 interview with Joe Turnbull, “Art is my world; without it I would probably be dead. It is my ally, it is alchemy, it is so powerful, it is a force within me.” She immediately started a new project, a volume that, once again, included visual elements, pictures, drawings (evolved from her two boys' squiggles), poems, and narrative essays. The book eventually came out in 2015 under the controversial title *Schizophrenics Can Be Good Mothers Too*. As the artist maintained in the Foreword section of the text, she intended to address a significant gap, as “very little literature exist[ed] about art and psychosis and how art [could] be used as a tool to keep the mind balanced” (Islam 2015: XII). Her objective was to employ what she had learned about her mental health condition to aid others with similar issues:⁷ “Being useful and making a contribution, I believed, was more effective at keeping my mind healthy in the long term” (Islam 2015: XI). To protect her children's privacy, she adopted a pen name, Q.S. Lam, which is actually a variation of her full name – Quazi Sanchita Islam – (Kumar 2022: 89), or another facet of her complex personality. The various sections which form the fragmentary

⁷ Mental health and related issues were the topic of a remarkable number of articles Sanchita Islam penned for the *Huffington Post*. In one such article entitled “Today is World Mental Health Day—Let’s Try to Be Kinder to People with Mental Health Problems” (2017), she fostered kindness and sympathy, emphasizing the importance of being “more humane and empathetic to those in mental pain.” Furthermore, in “Maternal Mental Illness is a Global Issue—Complex, Prolonged, and in Some Cases Devastating” (2018), she once again examined her conflictual relationship with motherhood, before concluding her journalistic piece with a positive and enlivening note: “I know there are other mothers suffering out there, but I just want them to know you are not alone and it does get better with time.” In 2018, she dedicated a poem – “To Sleep or to Die,” still unpublished – to Charlotte Bevan, the mother who threw herself and her newborn baby off a cliff as a result of her post-partum psychosis and sleep deprivation.

volume often relate the same episodes (centered on her psychosis) from different angles, even including contradictory details or slight discrepancies; after all, as Silke Arnold-de Simine (2018: 140) has argued,

memory studies have moved on from the idea of remembering as retrieval and recollection of faithfully stored stable information, picturing memory not so much as a fixed product but as a fluid and imaginative process in which the memory is remade every time remembering happens.

Sanchita actively campaigned to debunk misconceptions and promote inclusion, thus fostering what she termed “a mental health insurrection” (O’Hara 2015):

People with mental health problems, their lives don’t stop. A person with my diagnosis apparently ends up jobless, homeless, friendless, childless or dead. I mean, that’s not helpful. I am none of those things. I’m functioning. I’m published. I’m working, I’m earning. It’s really important for people to believe that they can make a contribution to society through their creativity. You’ve got to give people a sense of purpose. (O’Hara 2015)

This second phase of her inner and artistic journey was succeeded by the ultimate and most painful stage, beginning in 2016, when recurring flashbacks of the sexual abuse she allegedly suffered as a child from her stepfather began to intrude into her life. Joshua Pederson (2018: 101) has argued that traumatic events “strik[e] with such force that [they] ja[r] the brain and disallo[w] the normal recording of memory”: hence, gaps and lacunae – what Cathy Caruth (1995: 4) calls “radical disruption and gaps” – function as signifiers of a traumatic experience. Before 2016, Sanchita had no reminiscence of the time when, until she was three years old, she used to sleep in the “small room” (Kumar 2022: 87) with her mother’s second husband; then, she suddenly started to distinguish distressing glimpses of her past.⁸ She might also have inherited a disturbing legacy of suffering

⁸ In her blog, *artmotherhoodandmadness*, she offered further upsetting details about what had presumably happened, even though, in the entry meaningfully entitled “Recovered Memories Versus False Memory Syndrome,” she seemed to question her recollections, at times. She also mentioned “all the sexual assaults that [she had] suffered as an adult,” thus adding new layers of pain. Moreover, in an unpublished piece entitled “Precarity – The Great Unresolved Issue of Our Time,” which was presented at the Conference entitled

from her mother (herself a victim of verbal and physical abuse) and her female ancestors, thus re-enacting their *postmemories*, borrowing the term coined by Marianne Hirsch (1997: 22) to describe “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.” She came to understand that her mother’s Burmese foremother had probably been the victim of sexual violence at the hands of white colonists: Sanchita bore the imprint of that traumatic history within her blood. As the artist explained to Ajit Kumar (2022: 87), “The fact is I know something happened to me when I was a child. The trauma is in my body and psyche. My mother is also a trauma survivor; my biological father died when I was eight months old, home was not a safe place; although my parents did their best under trying circumstances, there was emotional and physical abuse.”⁹ Indeed, art served as an antidote to Sanchita’s hardships since her early childhood: as soon as she stopped sharing her stepfather’s bed, she began to draw “assiduously and diligently” (Kumar 2022: 87). Almost unconsciously, she employed the same survival strategy in her adult years: as she clarified, “my stepfather denies that he did anything, but I have suffered flashbacks of the abuse, and after I remembered at the age of 43, I suddenly started to make music” (Kumar 2022: 87). She also changed her name to Shonchi (another aspect of her intricate self), that is the way Sanchita is supposedly pronounced in Bengali. Over eight years, she

“Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures” (January 20-31, 2020, University of Rome Tor Vergata), the artist commented on the traumatic sexual violence suffered as a child: “The CSA [Child Sexual Abuse] is the missing piece of the mental jigsaw puzzle, now I am in a process of healing which will take many years and is a precarious process” (Islam 2019: 1).

⁹ As Sanchita elucidated in “Will We ever Be Good Enough Great Britain?” (2023a), her 2007 novel, *Gungi Blues*, was her “attempt to tell [her mother’s] story of coming to Britain, the trials and tribulations [she and her family] faced and how [they] surmounted them.” In the Foreword to *Gungi Blues*, she explained that trauma somehow permeated her family history: “Gungi –A gungi is a word that my mother used when I was small. She never told me what it meant. It is pronounced ‘Gung – ee.’ If you were to call someone a gungi it would imply that the person is a mad, unconventional person, with a unique view on life. This story is a tale of one family’s gungi blues” (Islam 2007: 3).

composed more than 450 pieces of what she refers to as *mental music*, “designed to ameliorate those in mental pain” (Kumar 2022: 88).¹⁰

An epiphanic moment in Sanchita Islam’s life occurred when, in 2018, she volunteered for Action Aid in the Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority indigenous to western Myanmar who were denied citizenship under the 1982 Myanmar nationality law. They are among the most persecuted peoples in the world and yet possibly the least visible (Albaladejo Garcia 2019: 5-65). Sanchita deeply bonded with the women¹¹ who, in her perspective, were suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome: their pain resonated with hers, as many of them had been raped and abused by Burmese military men. Here is how she described that poignant encounter:

As I listened to their stories I, too, became numb after a while, not quite believing what I was hearing, yet seeing the scars from where one woman had been hit by the butt of a gun, I knew what they were relaying was true. Yet despite losing their homes, loved ones, seeing babies burnt alive, and being forced to live in the camps (which are dire) the women showed tremendous fortitude. The heat at the camps was unimaginable, but they were all well dressed, they congregated together like a tribe and, yes, their sadness was palpable but when I met them and explained why I was there, one by one they opened up to me—eager to tell their story, eager to be heard. (Islam 2019: 4)

Sanchita created music, providing a “safe space for them” (Islam 2018b: 9) so that they could be soothed while voicing their memories. *Rohingya Lives Matter* (2019), a touching documentary, is the outcome of their collaborative efforts: once again, drawings are juxtaposed with black and white photographs and actual footage from the camp. Human voices blend with healing sounds, while captions cast light on the vulnerable existence of the refugees. In the final statement, the artist’s intent is unequivocally

¹⁰ In the podcast “Killing the Ghosts of the Past,” Shonchi was interviewed by Noelle Lim, who mainly asked the artist about her music and its therapeutic effect. In a 2018 interview, she stated that “music ha[d] a palliative impact on [her] brain” (Marino 2018: 159).

¹¹ As she observed, “Yes, the Rohingya are far removed from my life, but I feel a connection with them for I too am rootless and not accepted wherever I venture facing a myriad of questions and often, intense interrogation about my ethnic origin” (Islam 2018b: 6).

expressed: “Going to the camps was life changing and what I saw and heard will stay with me. I will continue to draw and paint the Rohingya. A genocide occurred; nothing has been done... the Rohingya deserve justice.”¹² Sanchita also praised the Rohingya women’s sense of community, their inclusiveness, and their mutual support, which the artist lacked in her life. In her unpublished essay on the intertwined concepts of precarity and precariousness, therefore, she urged her readers to “resurrect this sense of community, which is dying” (Islam 2019: 5), offering the following piece of advice: “If you are in a precarious position align yourself with like-minded souls; and then tangible change is possible” (Islam 2019: 5).

“I want to be creating until I am an old lady. I will feel that I have done my job if I die with a pen or a paintbrush in my hand” (Kumar 2022: 91): these were Sanchita’s words in one of the last interviews she released, in 2022. Unfortunately, her fate took a different turn. Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic and the practice of social distancing (which should have been more accurately termed *physical* distancing) contributed to eroding bonds of friendship, weakening our community cohesion, and isolating those already marginalized and excluded. In 2020 she resumed publishing pieces on her blog, *artmotherhoodandmadness*; in the entry entitled “What Now?”, she defined 2020 as a “strange” year “due to Covid-19 and lock down, acute social isolation and increased uncertainty” (Islam 2021b). She also lamented the difficulty in securing the funding that would allow her to continue her career as an artist, whose future developments looked unsure: “if I don’t get the grant then I guess I will have to apply again and have a major rethink. Or maybe I should stop being an artist?” (Islam 2021b). In the same entry, she revealed she had just completed two more volumes: *The Tree People* (her first illustrated book for children) and *Pain = Alchemy = Transformation*. In the latter, she argued that pain, “an inherent part of living” (Islam 2020: 2), might contribute to enhancing one’s creativity: “The utility of pain is something that is often overlooked; pain is not something to fear. Pain is something we all live with daily” (Islam 2020:7). Nonetheless, the new project she also hinted at, namely a novel entitled *Living in a*

¹² In the video description on YouTube, Sanchita emphasized that the title chosen for her documentary could be interpreted as a direct reference to the Black Lives Matter movement; “If I were to rename the film,” she wrote, “I think I would call it, *The Rohingya - A Forgotten Genocide* because that’s what it is” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kiub5wvktAc>).

Painting, visibly reflects her profound uneasiness and dissatisfaction: “I feel that I would rather inhabit my paintings than be in the real world, the real world is just so competitive and full of noise and people, these days I cannot even manage to go to the shopping mall” (Islam 2021b).

In her last years, the artist also suffered several pregnancy losses. In her imagination, she would have given birth to little girls, intending to shield them from the traumas of life, a protection that seemed absent in her own life. As she wrote in the draft of a poem entitled “The Unimaginable Pain of Losing 5 Embryos,” “I want my babies/ I will have my daughters/ They will have the life I never had/ And I will protect them/ And no one is going to mess with them” (Islam 2023b: 5). Despite the anguish and the sorrow that characterized the final months of Sanchita Islam’s life, I would like to conclude this essay on a lighter note. Writing under the pseudonym of Q.S. Lam, she contributed a letter to a repository managed by self-help book writer James Withey entitled “The Recovery Letters”¹³ designed to assuage the pain of depression and give hope. These are her words to the reader; this is her legacy to all of us:

You have to look at each day like a new canvas and decide the painting you want your day to be rather than paint the same old dark picture that just compounds that sense of doom, gloom and hopelessness. You have to choose the colours you want your painting to be even if your default stance is to go for morose shades of grey and black. There are flecks of light and colour in each day, tiny ones like a bright ochre, or a crimson scarlet. These iridescent colours shine and smile out at us all. They are friendly and warm. These colours can guide you towards a brighter place and help you paint a different sort of painting. A painting that when you look at it speaks to you like an old friend, inspires, comforts and stirs something deep inside, you just have to open your eyes a little wider and let those colours in.

Take good care of yourself, be kind to yourself, be your number one ally, and keep searching for that fleck of light sleeping in the shadows. It is there, I can see that tiny fleck right now – put it in your pocket and cherish it.

¹³ <https://www.therecoveryletters.com/>

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