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The Dead Poet and the Non Artist: A Review of Notes on a Scandal

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Abstract

Fifty years ago a famous poet Mustafa Zaidi receives his lover and muse Shahnaz Gul in his apartment in Karachi. The next day he is found dead; she is unconscious. Gul is charged with murder and her trial becomes a main distraction from an impending war. Tooba Masood and Saba Imtiaz tried to piece together a social history of seventies Pakistan in what is now the country's first true crime podcast.

Keywords

Pakistan, Podcast, True Crime, Poet, Artist, Woman, Karachi.

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Many Pakistani men of my generation may not know any poetry except for what they were forced to learn at school or bits they might have picked up from famous song lyrics. But most men would know a set of famous couplets by poet Mustafa Zaidi and would recite these sometimes coyly, sometimes boastfully, sometimes evoking a real, sometimes an imagined lover. Four lines allude to Zaidi's most famous lover Shahnaz Gul. One night more than fifty years ago she visited him in a small apartment in Karachi and didn't come out for more than twenty-four hours. When family and friends broke open the apartment door, Zaidi was found dead bleeding at the mouth, Shahnaz Gul was unconscious and apparently drugged. She was charged with Zaidi's murder, bail was denied, and before being acquitted a few months later, she became the most well-known woman in Pakistan. People turned up in throngs to see her at her court hearings. Newspaper reporters and photographers chased her from one police station to another. She was described as the most beautiful woman alive. She was also described as completely immoral, a social climber, a user of sex toys and powerful men, and even a diamond smuggler. Mustafa Zaidi's poetry is still sung by some of the most famous singers and his verses are recited by young and old, sometimes without even knowing they are reciting Mustafa Zaidi. Shahnaz Gul has become a somewhat obscure figure, a beautiful woman who may or may not have had a hand in his death. She definitely had a hand in fuelling his imagination.

Notes on a Scandal is probably Pakistan's first true crime podcast and it came out in that long forgotten era called Covid. Although Saba Imtiaz and Tooba Masood set out to do a whodunnit, what we get here is a leisurely exploration of early 70s Pakistan, social mobility, a woman trying to have a family and a life, occasionally a collage of the social mores and a series of what-the-hell-just happened moments. Most Pakistani podcasts are about politics and food. Professional chefs, home chefs, home mothers, middle aged men in green fields cook food, share recipes and smack their lips. Thousands of others just turn up at restaurants, roadside carts selling snacks and narrate stories of success about how someone became a millionaire selling samosas with a special sauce with a secret recipe. Political podcasts are more like inside gossip and conspiracy theories woven together. Politicians photoshopped with the head of a dog or donkey, fake photos and videos of journalists accepting bribes or sleeping with powerful people, women journalist portrayed as witches and prostitutes populate this landscape. There are polite sometimes candid discussions around legal matters. Religious sermons telling you which verse from the holy book or hadith

will cure your migraine and boost your income. One of the most popular religious podcasts comprise of sermons by a scholar who has been dead for thirty years. He is remembered by his edicts like the one about cricket which says that fast bowlers shouldn't rub their ball on their trousers because this might lead women astray. There are podcasts about economy, about history, an occasional one about poetry. There is hardly anything about crime. In a country where violent crimes barely make headlines there's very little audio story telling about cops and killers as if real murder is not even as interesting as the secret sauce for samosa. Some TV news channels do crime stories by re-enacting murders and kidnappings for ransom and child abuse but there's nothing that has stayed with the audience. *Notes On a Scandal* is a first of its kind. It might help to look at four lines of poetry that make up Mustafa Zaidi's declaration of love and war, and headlines around Shahnaz Gul who was accused of first loving and then murdering him.

Fankar Khud Na Thi, Meray Fan Ki Shareek Thi

(She wasn't an artist, but she was part of my art)

Before we see her, before we even know where she came from, we see Shahnaz Gul through her lover's poetry. And the first declaration we hear is that she wasn't an artist. She was a married woman with kids, she was soft spoken, she was sociable. She came from a small town where she had to observe some form of purdah but she was at ease in cosmopolitan Karachi, drinking and dancing her way into the city's elite circles. Everyone Tooba and Saba talked to, those who knew her and those who saw her from a distance, and some who had only heard about her all agree that she was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. Even after fifty years people ask the makers of *Notes* the same question: Did she really kill him? Have they seen those famous photographs that were mentioned in her trial?

The podcast more than once harks back to the same four lines from the famous poem, in which the poet declares his love, claims her as the most intimate companion, chides her for not being an artist, praises her for being modest and then drags her into the folds of his not so metaphorical bed. And just to ensure that everyone believes his version, the poet Mustafa Zaidi kills himself. We see her as a figure of mystery but outrightly we are told that she was no artist. As opposed to her, Mustafa Zaidi is an artist. Besides his poetry what makes him an

artist is the fact that once he was a communist, and he had tried to commit suicide before. Before we are made aware of his art, we are made aware of his artistic personality. An artist must have the urge to change the world, then failing to do it, must give up on the world and try and take one's own life. He becomes a bureaucrat, but he still remains an artist. After he loses his job in a corruption scandal (he was offered a bribe that he refused) he is on a path of self-destruction. You can be a male bureaucrat and still be a revolutionary poet.

You are a woman with children who gets out some evenings to attend a party and you'll become an easy woman, that person that everyone wants to take you to bed with. And everybody will see through you, that you are an artist's companion but not an artist. An artist must have a divided heart, so Zaidi has a family tucked away in Germany, while he pursues Shahnaz Gul recklessly. Shahnaz Gul seems to juggle her family life, her social scene and intimate affairs rather more practically till the dead poet drags her name into headlines.

Woh Rooh Ke Safar Mein Badan Ki Shareek Thi

(In the journey of the soul, she was my body's companion)

Saba and Tooba put in a lot of leg work trying to trace Shahnaz Gul's journey from a small conservative town to Karachi's incestuous, glitzy social set. They visit her family home in Gujranwala where she lived a veiled existence. They track down people who invited her to their parties, people who embraced her, people who envied her, people who patronised her. When they try to get beyond 'the most beautiful woman in the country', 'or when you saw her you wanted to take her to bed' they find very little. People around her reduced her to a sensual beast. Although Saba and Tooba return again and again to her motives, her family life, her double role as a socialite and a devoted mother, we are left with the memory of a woman who everybody wanted to be close to but were also afraid of understanding her. In the media she is accused of seducing powerful men for personal favours. But except for one brief trip to Europe, we don't see any signs of wealth or political influence. Even after her trip abroad, she is accused of smuggling diamonds. Again, there is no proof of that. It seems Gul attracted all the clichés of her time about the threat of a liberated woman. If she goes to a party and drinks and dances, she must sleep with other men, if she sleeps with other men she must have a motive other than mutual attraction.

Notes On a Scandal doesn't tell us much about what happened in that bedroom where the poet died, but it does tell us what happened outside the bedroom before and after the murder/suicide/overdose. With its mix of sex, drugs, poetry, murder, it would be easy to turn this podcast into a sizzler but Saba and Tooba are having another kind of fun here. In its production, the podcast is fairly basic. They quote the people they interviewed but don't use their recorded voices, there are no breathless audio links informing us BUT THEN... there's no ambient music, it seems they are trying to dull down their story. They seem to be telling us look this is more than a sex scandal, it's more than a murder mystery, it's our social history, it's about censorship. It's about desperate editors trying to keep their audience engaged by telling them what Gul was wearing at her trial, what was she eating, how times did she cry.

According to Saba and Tooba they wanted to write a book about the subject and decided to do a podcast in order to get publishers interested. Now they have a book deal. Probably the tone of the podcast is decided by this initial book ambition. They take a sensational story and turn it into our social history, less true crime, more how we lived back then.

Utra Tha Jis Pe Bab-e-Haya Ka Varq Varq

(And she was the one blessed with out-and-out modesty)

As Shahnaz Gul goes to jail and her trial makes daily headlines in West Pakistan, there's a horrible cyclone in East Pakistan and then there's a war and a series of massacres in Pakistan's bid to hold onto its eastern wing. When newspapers are full of stories of what Gul wore to her hearing, what she ate in her jail cell, who visited in the hospital, her story becomes a distraction from the horrors of war. We are horrified by the murder of one poet. We are curious about the killer beauty. But our newspapers and their editors seem to have no curiosity at the vast scale murder of our own people by our own army, many of them poets. Saba and Tooba are appalled by it but they are here to find out what happened in that room in Karachi.

According to the court records, Mustafa Zaidi had either taken or got hold of naked pictures of Shahnaz Gul, had designed and published thousands of pamphlets with these images and stored them in the garage of this house. The poet cries modesty, the public expects modesty from a woman, but there are

thousands of pages printed and ready to be distributed, revenge porn much before the era of online smut. (In Pakistan's court language it was an attempt to 'outrage her modesty'). When fifty years later our podcasters confirm this from court records and track down the printers of these pamphlets, people keep asking them if they have seen this pamphlet. Of course they haven't. But the urge to see a dead woman naked is the kind of perverse curiosity that fuelled the speculation around her person. She goes from being a poet's muse to an image repeated so extensively that it loses its mystique but none of its perverse power. Thousands of these images gathering dust in a garage are also a reminder that the revenge porn that has proliferated with the arrival of phone cameras is not rooted in gadgetry but an ancient urge to control, and manipulate and in the end annihilate a woman's desire. First seek poetic sustenance from it, then threaten to destroy yourself in an attempt to destroy her.

Bistar Ki Ek Ek Shikan Ki Shareek Thi

(She was there with me, in every crease of my bed)

Was this podcast about the obsessive love of a poet? Or is it about the fate of a woman who chooses to have it all? A husband, a family, a bit of partying and a poet who either loves her madly or goes mad when he is denied that love. Shahnaz Gul goes on to live many years after being acquitted of murder charges. She is readmitted into Karachi's high society. We don't know what people talk to her about when they talk to her after her stint in prison. Men suddenly seem to think that she has aged. Someone spots her at a Karachi beach, someone else spots her buying vegetable and fruits. What was once sensational and perverse becomes ordinary and everyday.

Notes on Scandal is chatty in its tone and doesn't try to keep you at the edge of your seat. Although many of the most important witnesses to the affair, the murder and the aftermath are quoted, we only hear them through Saba and Tooba's conversations. They visit the murder scene and the graveyard where the poet is buried but again they don't fall for true crime podcasts' reliance on dramatic twists and turns. Instead of breathless podcasters, they are more like two nerdy detectives stuck in an archive library, cutting up old headlines to solve a mystery but who often get distracted. And they seem to have had a lot of fun not solving this murder mystery.

Author details

Mohammed Hanif was born in Okara, Pakistan. He graduated from the Pakistan Air Force Academy as Pilot Officer but subsequently left to pursue a career in journalism. He has written for stage, film and radio. His debut novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, was longlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Novel. Hanif was previously Head of the BBC Urdu Service and now works as their special correspondent based in London and Karachi.