

Article

Form Poetry and the Pandemic

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Abstract: This article looks at a set of anglophone form poetry that I wrote for a course I took while pursuing my master's degree in Gender Studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi (2019–2021), during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The poems are a documentation of the life that I lived and experienced during this time. Using an auto-ethnographic method, this article simultaneously engages with poetic forms, such as the haiku, villanelle, sestina, and acrostic, and provides a self-reflexive analysis of the content and the South Asian context from which the poems emerged. Each poem, I argue, grapples with various gendered structures of interpersonal and state violence, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed in its wake. In this article, I explore the ways in which the everydayness of violence can be documented through art and creative practices. My primary question is: What is the form of the poem doing for the content of the poem; that is, in what ways do certain poetic forms assist in the documentation of personal experiences of violence during a pandemic? This article explores the political possibilities offered by the method of writing form poetry as a documentation of violence, as well as providing a 'witness' to it. Thinking more about the role of producing art vis-à-vis my academic research, I further ask: How can we expand the scope of the feminist research methods we use, and what role might form poetry play in this? I situate this article at the intersection of South Asian Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Literary and Cultural Studies, particularly focusing on the South Asian anglophone poetics of the written word in a post-pandemic time.

Keywords: pandemic; gender; violence; form poetry; method; South Asia; anglophone



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1. Introduction

It has been almost three years since the global COVID-19 pandemic started significantly altering how we live in and navigate this world. The unplanned pandemic-induced lockdown under India's current right-wing regime, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left the nation and its people in a health crisis, which soon turned into a number of other crises as well. The brunt of these crises was borne by the marginalized communities in India, especially the poor, including the lower-caste and lower-class migrant workers in 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled' jobs, or those in the informal employment sector. The suspension of public transport because of the lockdown resulted in many migrant workers based in the metropolitan cities of Delhi and Mumbai returning to their homes, which were often miles away, on foot. The impact of the pandemic on the economy of the nation led to rising unemployment, food insecurity, and unequal access to healthcare ([Human Rights Watch 2020](#); [Jesline et al. 2021](#)). The pandemic had widely different, and often starkly opposite, impacts on people across class, caste, religious, and gender lines. It also brought to the fore a digital divide, pushing many students from marginalized communities, who did not have access to or who could not afford the internet or internet-supporting devices, out of the education system, which had shifted entirely online.

A few months before the pandemic began, I enrolled in the Master of Arts program in Gender Studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi (2019–2021), immediately after finishing my Bachelor of Arts in History at Jadavpur University, Kolkata (2016–2019). I was halfway

through the second semester of my MA program when on 12 March 2020, following directions from the Government of Delhi, our university suspended in-person classes. The next day, I traveled back home to Kolkata, the city in which I was born and brought up and that I had finally left in 2019 to pursue my master's studies, still very unsure about the nature and duration of the crisis. Nine days later, on 22 March 2020, the Prime Minister announced a fourteen-hour nationwide Janata curfew (people's curfew) from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., which was soon followed by the announcement of a nationwide lockdown on the evening of 24 March 2020. My MA classes were shifted online, and I ended up finishing the rest of the program digitally from my home in Kolkata; this included completing two and a half semesters' worth of coursework alongside writing my MA thesis. The financial precarity of our lower-middle-class family was exacerbated by the pandemic, but I received some material support from Ambedkar University, which enabled me to continue my internet subscription so that I could attend classes and meet the requirements of the program.

The topic for my MA thesis stemmed from my involvement with the nationwide Muslim women's protests against the Indian government's adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2019. Before the pandemic started, I was actively participating in the student protests in Delhi, which were being organized in solidarity with Indian Muslims in general, and the twenty-four-hour non-violent sit-in of Muslim women protesting on the streets of Delhi's Shaheen Bagh (a Muslim majority working-class neighborhood), in particular. This series of nationwide protests started in 2019 against the intentional mass disenfranchisement of Muslims through the adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a set of Islamophobic citizenship laws, and the systemic state and communal violence to which Muslims are generally subjected under the current Hindu majoritarian dispensation in India. The primary purpose of these laws was to grant or deny citizenship based on religion. The CAA stated that all persecuted religious minorities from the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, except Muslims, were eligible for citizenship. This law, coupled with the NRC, caused a general sense of panic amidst the already marginalized Muslim community in India. The possible implementation of the NRC required that every person residing within its jurisdiction should prove their citizenship, the granting of which was, again, based on religion (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020, p. 6287). Thus, the national identity of Indian Muslims was being called into question with this scrutiny of their citizenship. The Muslim women's sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh was triggered by the police brutality that was meted out to student protesters from Jamia Millia Islamia, a predominantly Muslim University in Delhi, on 15 December 2019. The sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, and the other nationwide protests, however, were brought to an abrupt halt by the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. The protesters were forced to vacate the public sites of protest and go back into their homes. Soon after, the government took this opportunity to demolish the protest site and paint over every trace of the sit-in, such as the art installations and the graffiti.

The mobilization of songs and poetry in these protests, at the forefront of which were working-class Indian Muslim women, made me think about the ways in which the creative arts have historically been used to resist gendered and racialized oppression in South Asia. Songs such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz's 'Hum Dekhenge' (We Will See) and Varun Grover's 'Kagaz Nahi Dikhayenge' (We Won't Show Our Papers) became rallying cries at these protest sites, where these songs were sung to create "the atmosphere for action and charge[d] the participants emotionally" (Mitra 2023, p. 8). 'Hum Dekhenge', as a poem and a song, also has a longer history in South Asia, with its inception during Zia Ul Haque's oppressive regime in Pakistan during the 1980s (Dubrow n.d.). The Shaheen Bagh Manch or Stage is a raised platform that was faced by the crowd of women protesters; over the course of the hundred-day-long sit-in, the platform supported numerous performances, ranging from speeches and lectures to shayari (poetry) and rap (Chakrabarti 2019). I had the opportunity, on 15 January 2020, to climb up on the Shaheen Bagh Manch with my fellow

student protesters from Ambedkar University, Delhi, to raise slogans and sing communally with the protesting women of Shaheen Bagh.

Inspired by Shaheen Bagh, I decided to write my MA thesis about Indian women's resistance poetry, the relationship between public resistance movements being organized by women against state violence, and their private acts of resistance in the domestic space. I particularly focused on the ways in which women writers mobilized resistance against caste and domestic violence through their creative practices, such as poetry. In my thesis, I critically engaged with the works of two contemporary Indian poets, Meena Kandasamy and Aditi Rao, and argued that their poetry is both a documentation of, and a resistance to, their lived experiences of caste violence and domestic and intimate-partner violence. I observed how, in their poetry, resistance to the public and the private merged so that it could be deployed interchangeably—while resisting one, they were also resisting the other. That is, resistance to public acts of state violence also meant resisting private acts of domestic violence, and vice versa. It was through the form of poetry that this fluidity of their violent experiences could be recorded, narrated, and resisted, which is something that I explore further in this article. This fluidity is also evident in Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women, by protesting publicly, were both resisting the state violence against their communities and also defying the rigid gender norms that divide the public and the private lives of men and women, respectively. As Mitra puts it in her article, "*Shaheen Bagh* (2021): Gender, Affects, and Ita Mehrotra's Graphic Narrative of Protest", "the fact that this act of rebellion took place on the male-dominated city streets makes it doubly defiant" (Mitra 2023, p. 6). She goes on to quote Shilpa Phadke et al., who write: "... the fact that their [Muslim women's] entire community is looked down upon with hostility, and lives in fear of violence, means that they not only have decreased opportunities to venture out of community boundaries but also that their movements and behavior are more closely policed by their families and community" (Phadke et al. 2011, pp. 46–47). Mitra concludes that "in the Shaheen Bagh protest, the opposite happens, and it is the men in Muslim families as well as from other communities who do chores like cooking and distributing food, while the women are engaged in political conversations, usually considered to be the men's forte" (Mitra 2023, p. 7). Hence, the protest at Shaheen Bagh is an exemplar of how South Asian Muslim women were subverting the structures of private as well as public gender norms at the same time. It is this interrelatedness of the two that I argue form poetry helps to decipher.

2. Epistemological Concerns

In her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2022), Lauren Fournier traces the historiography of autotheory in feminist scholarship, explaining that: "Autotheory seems to best describe the practices of artists, writers, and other art and culture workers who move between the worlds of contemporary art, literature, and academia, in spaces where practice and research, writing and studio art, self-reflection and philosophical study meet" (Fournier 2022, p. 19). She writes about the critical self-reflexivity that feminist autotheory advocates for, which has been central to feminist research, including scholarship that does not outright engage with autotheory. Works such as Richa Nagar's *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism* (2014) insert the self's (the author's) multimodal positionalities as a scholar, an activist, a mother, a comrade, or a friend in order to theorize the contours of transnational co-authorship. Nagar's work is evidence of the long genealogy in feminist scholarship of engaging with the self and incorporating "the autobiographical or the personal in their 'intellectual' work" (Fournier 2022, p. 20). Nagar posits "a processual approach to reflexivity and positionality, combined with an acute awareness of the place-based nature of our intellectual praxis" (Nagar 2014, p. 18). Thus, a critical and evolving understanding of the self becomes crucial for any feminist research—the self cannot be divorced from one's writing or scholarship. It is in this vein that I pursue self-reflexive analysis while undertaking autoethnography, in order to write about the everydayness of violence experienced during the pandemic.

However, writing about violence as a postcolonial subject raises some epistemological questions, primarily regarding when such knowledge is produced under the hegemony of the Western academic space. These epistemological concerns stem from a long Eurocentric genealogy regarding the 'Third-World Woman', something that many postcolonial feminist theorists have tried to address in their scholarship. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has written in her article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", about the West's assumption of "an ahistorical, universal unity between [Third World] women based on a generalized notion of their subordination"; that is, universalizing the category of women in the third world as victims of male violence and as universal dependents (Mohanty 1988, p. 344). Writing about or documenting the everydayness of violence then runs the risk of feeding into this notion of the 'Third-World Woman' and the expected experiences of violence that they are supposed to embody. Randolph B. Persaud and Narendran Kumarakulasingam, in their article "Violence and Ordering of the Third World: An Introduction", discuss how violence in the context of the Third World is "generally treated either as purely internal and cultural", without taking into consideration the "racialized interconnectedness" between the West/the colonial past and postcoloniality (Persaud and Kumarakulasingam 2019, pp. 199–200). Here, it becomes pertinent for us to ask how form poetry can make the necessary interventions in postcolonial feminist epistemologies, such that we can decolonize the "generalized notion of [our] subordination" within these discourses surrounding violence, or, borrowing from Sylvia Wynter, rethink the racist colonial aesthetics defining the postcolonial woman (Wynter 1992). I argue that form poetry enables the documentation and narration of the experience of violence in South Asia during the pandemic, as well as serving as a methodological tool in postcolonial feminist research.

3. Form Poetry

Because of the pandemic, in the second half of my second semester onward, I was attending classes for my master's degree in Gender Studies online from my home in Kolkata. It was during the third semester, when I was still developing the idea for my MA thesis, that I decided to opt for a creative writing course being offered by the School of Culture and Creative Expressions (SCCE) at Ambedkar University, Delhi. The course was titled 'Crafting Poems', with Professor Akhil Katyal, the Delhi-based poet, as our instructor. Since I had decided to focus on South Asian women's writing, especially poetry, in my MA thesis, and being a poet myself, I thought that an academic course intended to hone our writing methods and processes would also help me in my broader research into poetry. The following semester, my fourth and final one in the MA program, Professor Akhil Katyal was offering another creative writing course, titled 'Seven Forms of Poetry'. While the first course dealt more with the "aesthetic, emotional, linguistic, political, and thematic choices in writing poetry", the second one focused on "a strong practice of the 'form'" and questioned our "understanding of the relationship between 'form' and 'content'" in our own practices as poets (AUD n.d. and AUD n.d.) These seven forms of poetry—ghazal, haiku, villanelle, concrete poetry/visual poetry, limerick, sestina, and acrostic—were both an object of study in class and also a method and practice of writing poetry. As the course description explains, "...the 'formal' within poetry is revealed as being more than just an application of predetermined rules, instead becoming an exploratory mode in which subject matters and intents of various kinds find a productive crucible, a generative closure, and a device most conducive for their expression" (AUD, 'Seven Forms of Poetry', AUD n.d.).

My intervention here is to explore the possibilities that form poetry opens for us in our feminist research and creative practices, especially, as in this article, regarding autoethnographic research on life-making during the pandemic. In this article, I use an autoethnographic method to write about the everydayness of violence experienced during the pandemic, arguing for form poetry as a documentation of and witness to the same. In her article "Poetry and Ethnography: Tracing Family Resemblances", Soibam Haripriya examines "the possible use of poetry in social anthropology, especially in the context of the writing of ethnography in sites of violence" (Haripriya 2018, p. 126). She stresses the need

for poetry in ethnography because she sees poetry as “the space where memory resides. Metaphors become a way to speak of the social context and resist erasures. This is not to put an exemplary status to poetry but to look at the text of poetry as a social document necessarily related to the external referent of the context and an internal referent of affect” (p. 133). She goes on to write:

“... poetry may neither be theory nor have conceptual capacity; however, certainly, what escapes the theoretical and the conceptualised forms are important. The hegemony of the theoretical is disrupted by the fact that theory needs to take into account sensibilities that are embedded in the un-sayable and the nonspoken. Metaphors in the poetic form are certainly to inform theories beyond those in the sub-discipline of sociology of affect. In speaking of the particular, it speaks to the universal. It remains a contention, however, if certain particulars are allowed the space to traverse its particularity and become the universal.” (p. 136)

While Haripriya is interested in the importance and use of the broader genre of poetry in ethnography, I am more focused on its form. I have borrowed from Haripriya the ideas of poetry as a ‘social document’ and as a ‘witness’, on which I will elaborate further in the context of my article.

While a variety of poetic forms can be found in several linguistic traditions in South Asia—the ghazal, for instance, traces its origins to the Urdu language—not many of these forms have been taken up in anglophone poetry. Although there has been limited engagement with form poetry in the works of contemporary anglophone South Asian women poets, the ghazal nevertheless remains one of the most popular forms of poetry in South Asia. It has been experimented with, in English, by poets such as Agha Shahid Ali in his anthology of ghazals, where, through the form of the ghazal, he engages with the political upheavals in Kashmir in the 1990s, along with navigating his own tumultuous relationship with his homeland (Ali 2004). More recently, Aditi Rao’s poem ‘Unreachable’ in her collection, *a kind of freedom song*, is another example of an English ghazal (Rao 2019, p. 68). Aditi Rao has also made use of the limerick form in this collection as an ‘interlude’ after every section in the book. In *a kind of freedom song* (2019), Rao is primarily grappling with experiences of intimate-partner violence, along with a kind of feminist poetic reiteration and reflection on the same. She also experiments with concrete poetry in this collection, while most of her other pieces are free verse. In one of her poems, ‘If you were a poem, you would be lyric’ she reflects on the nature of form while relating it to the experiences of being in a violent relationship (Rao 2019, p. 42). Following this tradition, I argue for the potential that form poetry has within postcolonial South Asian anglophone literary culture in terms of its engagement with experiences of violence.

3.1. Haiku

One of the first forms through which I started writing about the lived experiences of the ongoing pandemic was the haiku. The haiku is a very short poetic form that originated in Japan. Even though it originated in Japan and developed within Japanese linguistic traditions, it has become immensely popular among poets writing in English. Traditional Japanese haiku rules often cannot be translated into English because of the phonetic differences between the two languages, on which the original rules are based. Most haikus written in English are usually poems of three short lines in a non-rhyming scheme. When I first encountered the tiny form of the haiku, with its economy of words, I was reminded of the food scarcity that the country, including our lower-middle-class family of four, was experiencing during the pandemic. The 2021 Global Hunger Index, which was released in October, ranked India 101st out of the 116 countries surveyed, seven ranks lower than the previous year’s ranking. The pandemic-induced lockdown brought on its heels growing unemployment and diminishing purchasing power, leading to most families hardly being able to afford three meals a day (Masih 2021). For my first haiku, I borrowed the idea from Sukanta Bhattacharjee’s Bangla poem, ‘Hey Mahajibon’ (O Great Life), in the anthology *Chharpatra* (1947), in which he writes about how hunger makes it

difficult for you to write poetry, so much so that when you look at the beautiful full moon, instead of romanticizing its beauty, all you can think about is a burnt chapati (the Hindi word for bread) that you wish to eat (Chakravarty 2020). Below, an English translation of the original Bangla poem is followed by my haiku that was inspired by it:

O great life, no more of this poetry
 Now bring the hard, harsh prose,
 Wipe away the poetry-softened chimes
 Strike the stern hammer of prose today!
 No more need for the tenderness of poetry
 Poetry today I give you leave
 In the realm of hunger, the world is prosaic
 The full moon is like scalded bread (Chakravarty 2020).

Haiku-I

Purnima's full moon--
 hunger makes it resemble
 a burnt chapati

The haiku form has often been used by poets to write about nature or seasons. Marshall and Simpson write in their article, "Deconstructing Haiku: A Dialogue", that "a haiku is a poetic form that generally concerns itself with the world outside the self, the world of nature, and the possibility of experiencing oneness with all that" (Marshall and Simpson 2006, p. 117). However, how do you write about 'the world outside the self' when you are uncomfortable inside your own body? To answer that question, I decided to employ the haiku form in a poem that highlights the impossibility of romanticizing nature on an empty stomach.

In my second haiku, I wrote about the unpaid gendered labor of cooking, a burden that was more pronounced during the pandemic, when families who had houses were trapped inside, increasing the women's workload of domestic tasks. Feminist scholarship has always recognized the home as a site that has been structured by patriarchy and capitalism (Baviskar and Ray 2020, p. 561). Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray write in their article, "COVID-19 at Home: Gender, Class, and the Domestic Economy in India", that "This home, then, with its gendered division of labor, is the space where women encounter structural, epistemic, and sometimes, physical violence; it is where children are socialized into reproducing the pattern of these practices and prejudices" (p. 562). In most Indian households, gendered norms govern the distribution of unpaid domestic chores, which remain largely invisible and undervalued. Families who can afford it will usually employ female domestic workers, or "maids", from the lower-class and lower-caste communities. The pandemic-induced lockdown and panic, however, led to many domestic workers losing their jobs without being paid their wages. Baviskar and Ray explain that "domestic workers were characterized as the carriers of contagion, a threat to middle-class homes, even though throughout this period, the virus was being transmitted almost entirely by well-to-do Indians who had traveled abroad" (p. 565). This increased burden of unpaid domestic work also resulted in many women quitting their education or the workforce (Chauhan 2020, p. 398). The tiny form of the haiku allowed me to highlight the invisibilization of feminized unpaid domestic labor that was happening inside our house, as well as in many others. Being forced to stay at home the whole day, this invisibilization was even more palpable, as the burden of household chores, such as cooking, fell mostly on women, including my mother, myself, and my sister:

Haiku-II

Labor
 Spicy mixed rice with
 chicken, egg, potato--
 Rs. 500; for free.

The economy of words that the haiku necessitates enables the form to reflect on other scarcities, such as the scarcity of food during the pandemic, or the scarcity of recognition of the gendered structures of domestic labor, aggravated profoundly by the pandemic.

3.2. Villanelle

The villanelle is “a French verse form consisting of five three-line stanzas and a final quatrain, with the first and third lines of the first stanza repeating alternately in the following stanzas. These two refrain lines form the final couplet in the quatrain” (Villanelle n.d.). It is an inherently repetitive form that can be used effectively to write about one’s obsession or mania since a word or concept will be repeated throughout the poem, over and over again. The repetitive nature of both the poem and the mania allowed me to use this form to write about my trichotillomania. During the pandemic, even time felt repetitive, without any seeming progress, which caused the anxiety that caused the mania to be triggered. The gendered effects of the pandemic on mental health conditions were felt throughout the world, including in India, because of an accumulation of reasons that made women more vulnerable. There was an increasing number of cases of domestic violence against women. Women’s employment was impacted more severely compared to men’s employment (Roy 2022). As UN Women reported, “Since women in India spend more hours caring for children, the elderly, and sick family members, and masks and other personal protective equipment are often designed and sized for men, women may be at risk of more exposure to the virus” (UN Women 2021). The lockdown meant that I lost access to the mental health services that I was receiving from my university while I was in Delhi. There were some virtual services available, but my violent domestic context was not conducive to accessing those services.

Trichotillomania

You lose your hair one at a time,
when you pull each one out slowly,
hoping to be free of these confines.

You notice the texture, its design,
how it falls between your fingers. Really,
you lose your hair one at a time.

You teach your lovers your hair is *mine*.
Even as they lose themselves in it, actually
hoping to be free of these confines.

You reassure them your pain is benign.
Because once you start losing it wholly,
you lose your hair one at a time.

They spend days collecting hair off you-- fine
bruises on your skin; you’re mostly
hoping to be free of these confines.

Between now and then, whenever I pine
for *you*, I am reminded of how irresistibly
I lose my hair one at a time,
hoping to be free of these confines.

The form of the villanelle allows one to reflect on the persistence of the deteriorating mental health conditions of the most vulnerable people during the pandemic. This repetitive form also captures the repetitiveness of the structures of violence, which were only heightened during the pandemic.

3.3. Sestina

Continuing the discussion on pandemic time, Sven Kunisch et al. have written about how the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore multidimensional and complex experi-

ences of temporalities. For instance, “‘flattening the curve’—the key crisis management strategy pursued by many governments—is about *slowing down* the spread of the virus so that hospitals *gain time* to ramp up capacities and to heal patients without overflowing” (Kunisch et al. 2021, p. 1411). It was, thus, primarily through these diverse non-linear relative experiences of time that one navigated the pandemic: time became broadly divided between the pre-pandemic past and the post-pandemic future.

I primarily experienced time during the pandemic as being repetitive, similar to a loop or mania. During the lockdown, I did not conceptualize time as linearly progressing toward a post-pandemic future, but instead experienced time as being stuck in a circularity. This loss of an apparent linear experience of pre-pandemic time was eased by the rules of writing form poetry. The discipline of an academic course, which was accompanied by deadlines and grades, also provided a temporal structure that the experience of pandemic time did not have. Form, both academically and through poetry, thus provided a temporal and disciplinary structure during such a complex period as the pandemic. The Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali, started experimenting with poetic forms when he started working on his book *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997). Hena Ahmad writes about this:

“Two things coincided with the writing of this book: the start of political turbulence in Kashmir, and Shahid’s meeting with James Merrill. Raising “the stakes” for himself, challenging himself to use traditional poetic forms he had never tried before, and taking on the agony caused by the conflict in Kashmir, Shahid found that both the rigorous poetic forms and James Merrill did not allow him to make things “convenient” for himself. “Its large subject-matter, the turmoil in Kashmir,” in Shahid’s words, “accompanies my largest aesthetic canvas so far. I wanted to honor the cruel luck of being given as one’s subject the destruction of one’s home[land] . . . by serving the language and not letting it become an aesthetic convenience”” (Ahmad 2016, p. 380).

Ali explains how he started experimenting with form poetry during the political upheavals in his occupied country, Kashmir, and how, through these forms, he wrote about this ‘large subject-matter’. I argue in a similar vein that I came upon form poetry during the very difficult time of the pandemic, and its inconvenience, or its rules and structures, made space for me to document pandemic life and the passage of time.

The next form, a sestina, is a rather complicated one. It is defined as:

“a complex French verse form, usually unrhymed, consisting of six stanzas of six lines each and a three-line envoy. The end words of the first stanza are repeated in a different order as end words in each of the subsequent five stanzas; the closing envoy contains all six words, two per line, placed in the middle and at the end of the three lines. The patterns of word repetition are as follows, with each number representing the final word of a line, and each row of numbers representing a stanza:

1 2 3 4 5 6

6 1 5 2 4 3

3 6 4 1 2 5

5 3 2 6 1 4

4 5 1 3 6 2

2 4 6 5 3 1

(6 2) (1 4) (5 3).” (Sestina n.d.)

This poetic form is such that it seems as though the following stanza is consuming the stanza preceding it, or as if the poem is closing in on itself, making the reader feel claustrophobic. For the sestina, I chose to write about my experiences with domestic violence, by further complicating the temporalities in the poem:

Aalu-Bhaat'e: A Sestina

My father dumps groceries at the doorstep of our house:
 3 kg potatoes, 2 kg onions, 20 kg rice, etc., etc. My mother
 carried them to the kitchen when she was expecting me,
 an hour before her pregnant belly gave way. He
 later took a moment to decide who to
 blame for the tiny blots of red on her *shaya* that day
 red, like *his* blush when I told *him*, "I love you, every day."
 "And soon, I will build us a big house!"
He reassured me that *he* loves me *despite*, not *too*.
 My father dumped the *chaal-er-bosta* for my mother
 to carry inside. After washing his hands, he
 switched on the TV as his orders for me
 followed. I boiled a cup of water to make tea for my
 father. I let the water steam for an hour today.
 I was lost in the thoughts of how beautiful *he*
 had looked when *he* had come all the way till my house
 to drop me off after classes. My mother
 rushed from the bathroom a little too
 late. My body was already scalding at two
 different places. My father demanded from me
 a cup of tea at the earliest. I wiped the water using my mother's
 old pieces of sarees, which serve as rags now. Till this day
 she carries heavy sacks of rice to feed our house.
 "That is the only way she can remember her baby", I told *him*.
He listened intently as I narrated to *him*
 snippets from the life I had led for twenty-two
 years, before I finally met *him*. The house
 that *he* promised to build for us will be my
 parole soon. *He* allowed me to day-
 dream some more before I had to return to my mother's
 careful *shongshar*. I wondered how she managed, my mother,
 to keep everything clean. In which drawer did she hide my father's anger, his
 frustrations; under which plate did his resentments from their days
 together go? Which wall did she paint over, which window did she pull to?
 My father let me know that a few years down the line, I
 will be given the responsibility to maintain our house.
 How will I, day and night, like my mother,
 prevent the house from peeling? Inside which *bosta* will I stash his
 fists? Which grain of which rice will come to sate the loss in me?
shaya—petticoat
chaal-er-bosta—a sack of rice
shongshar—household
Aalu-Bhaat'e—potatoes with rice

The pandemic saw an exacerbated rise in the rates of domestic violence cases in India, with the lockdown making it even harder for women to leave their homes and seek help or shelter (Parvathi 2021). I, however, did not write about my experiences of domestic violence during the pandemic, instead choosing to write about experiences from the past, to highlight the fluidity with which violence is sometimes experienced. The rules that I had to follow to maintain the form of the sestina guided me, and the form, in turn, made it easier for the poem to document the fluidity of the violence that I was recounting. Experiences of violence can become interchangeable, or may even blur into each other, as I

have also mentioned earlier, making the documentation of those experiences even more complicated. I argue here that form poetry can bear witness to this complexity because “poetry as a genre. . . blurs the boundary between fact and fiction and provides for us a way to look beyond the dichotomy” (Haripriya 2018, p. 143). The sestina I wrote, even though it recounted a past experience of violence, reflected the claustrophobia experienced during the pandemic by domestic violence survivors who were trapped at home because of the lockdown and who were unable to seek help from outside. In the piece “Poetry and Knowledge”, Aimé Césaire writes: “The poet approaches the poem not just with his whole soul but with his whole being. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole. . . all the images—whether grasped or received, all the weight of the body, all the weight of the mind. Everything that has been lived; everything that is possible” (Césaire 1996, pp. 138–39). Therefore, instead of a linear narration of the experience of violence as the only truth, form poetry allows for a muddy narrative of ‘everything that has been lived; everything that is possible’, so that violence can be written about in the fluid and complex ways in which it is experienced. In her book *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (2018), Leigh Gilmore writes that “women’s witness is discredited by a host of means meant to *taint* it: to contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonor through shame, such that not only the testimony but the person herself is smeared” (Gilmore 2018, p. 2). In her book, Gilmore explores the systemic invisibilization of women’s testimony. She elaborates on how women are not believed when they bear witness to racialized and gendered forms of violence, and their voices are often questioned as unreliable. Here, the use of form poetry as a witness to violence is pertinent because even while it does not claim the single truth of experience, it is able to document these obscure experiences of violence, dissolving the dichotomy between fact and fiction. Haripriya calls this “engagement with poetry. . . a way of stating the *unsayable/unspeakable*” (Haripriya 2018, p. 132).

3.4. Acrostic

The final form that I discuss in this article is the acrostic, which is a simpler and more flexible form than the rest, allowing for far more leeway to experiment with the rules. In an acrostic, the first letters of each line of the poem, when read together, form a word or a phrase that has some meaning of its own. The poem that I submit for this form started out as a pandemic-induced stuck-at-home game between me and my sister in 2020. The game involved collating an A to Z vocabulary of all the words that had entered our lexicon because of the pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic, the vocabulary kept expanding, and so did the poem:

Pandemic Vocabulary

A- Affected, Arogya Setu, AstraZeneca, Asymptomatic, Atmanirbhar

B- Buffer Zone, Bed, Black Fungus, Bodies in Ganga

C- Corona, Covid, China, Community Spread, Contact Tracing, Contagious, Comorbidity, Curve, Containment, Cases, ‘Chinese’ Virus, Covaxine, Co-win, Covishield- Rs. 950

D- Death, Doctor, Delta Variant, *Dawai bhi aur kadaibhi, Dabai bi aarkodai bi.*

E- Evacuation, Essential Services, Environment, Eight Phase Elections

F- Face-shield, Flattening the Curve, Funeral Pyres

G- Gloves, Germs, G-Meet, Go Corona-Corona Go

H- Herd Immunity, Hydroxychloroquine, Hotspot, Home Isolation, Hospitals, Healthcare Workers

I- Immunity, Immuno-compromised, Inside, Isolation, Infectious, India Variant

J- Jobless, Johnson & Johnson, Janta Curfew

K- Kill, Kits, Kumbh Mela

L- Lockdown

M- Mask, Mouth, Moderna, Mutation, Migrant Workers

N- Nose, Novel, Numbers, News, Nebulizer, Normal, No Beds Available
 O- Oxygen, Ostracize, Online (classes), Out-break, Oximeter, Oxygen Cylinder
 P- PPE, Positive, Pandemic, Pfizer
 Q- Quarantine
 R- Rest, Rising, Red Zone, Remdesivir
 S- Sanitizer, Social Distancing, Super-spreader, Swab Test, Sputnik, Slot-book, Second Wave
 T- Twenty-twenty-one, Test, Temperature, Thermal Gun, T-zone, Thali Bajao
 U- Unlock, Unemployed
 V- Vaccine, Virus, Vitamins, Variant, Ventilator, Vande Bharat Mission
 W- Wuhan, Work From Home, Webinar, Wave
 X- Xenophobia
 Y- Yearloss, Years Lost
 Z- Zinconia, Zoom

I wanted to populate the poem with the words and phrases that connected us to our 'new normal'. Many of the terms used in the poem also have affective political connotations, usually symbolizing the gross mismanagement of the pandemic by the right-wing Indian government, and also worldwide. This poem made me question: How do we write about the pandemic when the pandemic is raging all around us? Does writing itself become a leisure and privilege at these times? I found some comfort in form, which, to an extent, dictated the poem's content, as I wanted this acrostic to be a documentation of and witness to the life that we have been living since 2020 and the language we have used to make sense of that life.

I wrote a second acrostic for class, which again talks about the gendered divisions of domestic work, especially mental load, a term that the feminist scholar Emma has explained as the additional task of assigning work that a woman is often expected to undertake in a domestic setup ([Emma 2018](#)).

I asked a man to make himself a
 daily cup of coffee: to keep the
 heat at sim; to use the steel *degchi*
 instead of the other; to look for sugar in the old
 kitchen cupboard; to never use
kachadudh. Later, his dry, *etho* cups
 and utensils in the sink reminded me, oh
 right, I forgot to ask him to clean after himself!
degchi—saucepan
kachadudh—raw milk
etho—unwashed

When the first letters from each of the lines in the poem in the original language are brought together as a word, it reads 'Dhikkar' (the Bangla word for 'I condemn'), and when the last letters from each of the lines in the poem are read together, it reads 'ei desh!' (Bangla for 'this country'), or, in other words, 'I condemn this country'. The first and last letters of the title of the poem are also the first and last letters of 'India'. The form of the acrostic has often been used as a form of dissent, where, often, the body of the text hides a larger message. For instance, the resignation letter of Daniel Kammen, formerly the science envoy at the United States State Department, contained the acrostic IMPEACH, indicating his opposition to the then-President of the United States, Donald Trump ([LaFrance 2017](#)). Diverting from the usual practice, in which only the first letters of the lines form an acrostic, in my poem, both the first letters of the lines and the last letters form acrostics. The poem is, thus, bookended by acrostics, in order to recreate the confinement experienced during the pandemic and everything else that it induced. While experimenting with such a use of the acrostic form, I wrote a poem that is seemingly about the gendered divisions of domestic labor, while, at the same time, condemning the majoritarian nation-state for its failures and

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