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How Does a Mystery Remember? Women's Histories, Sufi Story, and Narrative Form in Faiqa Mansab's The Sufi Storyteller

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Abstract
This paper asks how the murder mystery can function as a form of memory. Focusing on Faiqa Mansab's *The Sufi Storyteller* (2025), it argues that the novel uses detective structure and self-reflective storytelling to preserve women's histories that official and familial narratives leave unrecorded. The investigation opens with a murder in a university library but the answers the novel seeks lie in interpreting stories, symbols and inherited silences rather than in evidence alone. Drawing on Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, Hirsch's postmemory and Spivak's work on the subaltern, the paper shows how the relationship between Layla and Mira, scholar and storyteller, turns the crime plot into a search for a lost female lineage. The analysis proceeds in three movements. The first examines the metafictional frame, in which a course on Sufi stories and the tales told within the plot comment on narration itself, inviting the reader to interpret as the characters do. The second reads the crime plot's clues as a symbolic language, showing how detection becomes a practice of reading what has been withheld. The third turns to the mother daughter bond, considering how trauma and knowledge pass between generations and what obstructs that passage. The paper also considers what it means to stage this recovery in English, for a transnational readership, in a genre usually associated with closure. It concludes that the novel preserves women's histories by making their partial recovery visible and that forgiveness, not proof, is the condition on which knowledge becomes possible.

Keywords: Anglophone Pakistani Literature, Detective Fiction, Metafiction, Women's Histories, Post Memory, Sufi Storytelling

Introduction

Every archive is built as much from what it leaves out as from what it keeps. National histories, family genealogies, and institutional records all decide, often without announcing it, whose lives deserve preservation and whose can be allowed to dissolve. Women's histories have repeatedly fallen on the wrong side of that decision. They survive, when they survive at all, in forms that official record-keeping has little patience for: in whispered anecdotes, in recipes and lullabies, in the stories mothers tell daughters at the edges of what can safely be said. The phrase "old wives' tales" captures the problem in miniature. It names a body of women's knowledge while discrediting it in the same breath, converting testimony into superstition so that nothing in it needs to be believed. Faiqa Mansab's *The Sufi Storyteller* (2025) takes up this problem through an unexpected form. It is, on its surface, a murder mystery. A body is discovered in a university library in Illinois, and the protagonist, Layla Rashid, a scholar of women's roles in storytelling traditions who is teaching a

course on Sufi stories, finds herself drawn into the investigation. Yet the novel's deeper pursuit is not simply the identity of a killer. It is the recovery of something that has been silenced for far longer than the crime has been committed. This paper asks a question that the novel's own structure makes unavoidable: how does a mystery remember? More precisely, it asks how the conventions of detective fiction, combined with a persistent self-consciousness about storytelling itself, allow the novel to preserve women's histories that official and familial narratives leave unrecorded, and what this preservation costs, and concedes, in the process.

The question matters because the detective genre is usually understood as a machine for closure. In its classical form, the genre moves from disorder to explanation, from a body that cannot be accounted for to a culprit who can. Memory, by contrast, is incomplete, contested, and prone to distortion. To place a project of historical recovery inside a genre built on resolution is to risk either forcing the past into a tidier shape than it can bear or letting the genre's expectations quietly collapse. Mansab's novel does something more interesting than either. Its clues are not only physical evidence but symbols, stories, and inherited silences, and the interpretive work required to read them resembles the work of a scholar of narrative far more than that of a forensic investigator. The mystery becomes a way of dramatizing how the past is read rather than simply solved.

This argument rests on a distinction that Tzvetan Todorov (1977) made famous in his account of the detective story. Every classical detective narrative, he observed, contains two stories: the story of the crime, which is absent and must be reconstructed, and the story of the investigation, which is present and unfolds on the page. In *The Sufi Storyteller*, the absent story is not only the story of a murder. It is also the story of a woman's life, or of several women's lives, that was never entered into any record. The investigation that occupies the foreground is therefore doubled: Layla seeks the author of a crime in the present while also seeking the meaning of a past that has reached her only in fragments. The novel opens this second inquiry early. Layla is haunted by a nightmare she has had since the age of nine, in which a tall, tearful woman whispers something she cannot make out. The words are never heard in the dream, and the image becomes a compact figure for the entire problem of women's histories: a message addressed to a listener who has been given no means of receiving it.

To theorize this problem, the paper draws on three bodies of work. The first is Linda Hutcheon's (1988) account of historiographic metafiction, which describes novels that are intensely self-aware about their own fictionality while still engaging with historical events and, crucially, questioning how history itself is constructed and transmitted. Hutcheon's framework helps explain why Mansab's novel keeps drawing attention to storytelling as an activity, through Layla's course, through the tales embedded in the plot, and through the very figure of the storyteller, rather than treating narrative as a transparent window onto the past. The second is Marianne Hirsch's (1997, 2012) concept of postmemory, which describes the relationship that later generations bear to experiences they did not live themselves but which have been transmitted to them so deeply, through stories, images, and silences, that they shape their own sense of self. Layla's recurrent nightmare, and her relationship with the storyteller Mira, are best understood within this framework, as inheritance rather than recollection. The third is Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question of whether the subaltern can speak, and the ethical difficulty it raises for anyone who tries to recover the voices of the marginalized: that recovery risks becoming a form of ventriloquism. For South Asian women's histories in particular, this concern has been developed in the work of Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Veena Das (2007), who show how women's experience of violence and loss is carried in testimony, silence, and gesture rather than in documents. Taken together, these frameworks allow me to read the novel's form as an argument about what kind of knowledge women's histories are, and why such knowledge cannot be gathered in the way an archive gathers evidence.

The title of the novel points toward a further dimension of this argument. Storytelling in the Sufi tradition is not merely entertainment; it is a way of conveying truths that resist direct statement, a method of

teaching through parable, image, and indirection. One review of the novel notes that the term "Sufi" here reaches back before Islam and extends to any storytelling that prompts deeper reflection, a reminder that the novel draws on a broad, syncretic inheritance rather than a single doctrinal one. This matters for reading, because it means the novel's account of storytelling cannot be reduced to a national or confessional archive. It is, rather, a tradition that women have often carried and shaped, and that the novel presents as a repository of knowledge that conventional institutions have not valued. The symbolic clues that structure the plot, such as the walnut found clutched in a victim's hand, a Sufi image of a hard shell protecting a kernel of truth, belong to this tradition of indirect meaning. To follow them, the characters must interpret rather than merely observe. The novel thus teaches its readers a way of reading that its own plot demands. The paper's argument is also shaped by the context in which the novel operates. *The Sufi Storyteller* belongs to a body of Anglophone Pakistani fiction in which the recovery of women's histories has been a recurring concern. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991) rendered Partition through a child's perception, foregrounding the experience of women within the violence of 1947. Kamila Shamsie's novels, notably *Salt and Saffron* (2000) and *Kartography* (2002), reconstruct family lore across the ruptures of Partition and the war of 1971, treating inherited stories as both precious and unreliable. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989) approaches memory through fragmentary, self-conscious memoir. These works established that English-language fiction could serve as an archive of women's experience that official histories neglected. Mansab's novel extends this tradition in two ways. It moves the setting across continents, linking an American university with Lahore and other locations, and it adopts a popular genre, the thriller, that is rarely associated with historical recovery. These choices raise a question about the conditions of recovery in a transnational, English-language, genre-inflected form. What is gained when women's histories are carried by a story designed to be read quickly, and widely, and what might be lost? Because the novel is recent, critical scholarship on it remains limited, and the present study therefore draws primarily on close reading of the text, supported by reviews and by the broader scholarship on historiographic metafiction, postmemory, and South Asian women's testimony. This is both a limitation and an opportunity. It means the paper cannot rely on an established critical consensus about the novel, but it also means the reading offered here can establish a framework for later work. The aim is not to subsume the novel into existing theory but to test those theories against a text that complicates them. Where Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction concerns the construction of public history, Mansab's novel turns the same self-awareness toward intimate, domestic, and oral transmission. Where Hirsch's postmemory is usually discussed in relation to well-documented atrocities, the novel presents an inheritance whose very content is uncertain.

The argument unfolds in five sections. The first section lays out the theoretical framework in more detail and clarifies how the concepts of the gendered archive, metafiction, and postmemory will be used. The second examines the novel's metafictional frame, showing how Layla's profession and the stories embedded in the plot turn narration itself into a theme, and how this invites the reader to interpret alongside the characters. The third turns to the mystery, reading the clues, symbols, and the killer's own written message as a language of concealment and disclosure, and analyzing how detection becomes a practice of reading what has been withheld. The fourth considers the relationship between Layla and Mira, scholar and storyteller, and the search for a female lineage that the plot gradually opens, attending to how knowledge and trauma pass between women and what obstructs that passage. The fifth addresses the novel's treatment of forgiveness and its refusal of total closure, arguing that these are not narrative failures but part of its claim about what women's histories are and how they can be known. A brief conclusion draws these threads together and reflects on what the novel suggests about the future of such recovery in Anglophone Pakistani fiction.

Literature Review

This paper sits at the meeting point of several bodies of scholarship: work on the gendered archive and women's historical testimony, theories of metafiction, studies of postmemory, criticism of detective fiction,

and the growing field of Anglophone Pakistani literary studies. It also draws on scholarship about Sufi storytelling and women's oral traditions, which supplies the cultural background of Mansab's novel. This review takes each in turn, identifies where it leaves questions open, and shows where the present study intervenes. *The Sufi Storyteller* appeared only in 2025, and no sustained scholarly criticism of it appears to exist yet, so the review maps the conceptual ground that makes such a reading possible.

1. Women's histories and the problem of the archive

The first strand concerns how archives silence. Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) ties the archive to authority, since to archive is to decide who gathers, consigns, and interprets the record. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) makes the point in historical terms, arguing that silences enter history at four moments: when sources are created, when they are assembled into archives, when they are retrieved as narratives, and when their significance is assigned in retrospect. Saidiya Hartman (2008) answers an especially severe case of archival absence with "critical fabulation," a method that narrates the gaps while admitting that the lives it imagines cannot be fully recovered. Although Hartman writes about the Atlantic slave trade, her insistence that recovery and its failure be told together has influenced work well beyond that field.

In South Asian studies these concerns are worked out largely through Partition. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998) and Urvashi Butalia (1998) turned to oral testimony because the official record of 1947 said little about what happened to women, including the abducted women whom the new states "recovered," often against their wishes. Butalia treats silence as a form of evidence: what families and survivors decline to say is part of the history. Veena Das (2007) shows that knowledge of violence lodges in everyday speech, gesture, and relationships rather than in any public record. Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question whether the subaltern can speak adds a warning: efforts to retrieve marginal voices can repeat the epistemic violence they aim to correct if the retriever speaks in the subject's place. Together, this scholarship supports three premises of the present study: women's histories are structurally under-recorded, they survive in oral and indirect forms, and their retrieval is ethically fraught. Its limit is its concentration on testimony and non-fiction. It says less about how a fictional genre built on investigation might stage retrieval and its limits.

2. Metafiction and historiographic narration

Patricia Waugh (1984) defines metafiction as fiction that draws attention to its own status as an artifact in order to question the relationship between fiction and reality. Linda Hutcheon (1980, 1988) refined the idea with her account of historiographic metafiction, which joins this self-reflexivity to historical subject matter. Such novels, she argues, do not deny the past but show that we know it only through texts and narrative choices, and they place that paradox at the centre of the work. Hutcheon's reading of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* made this mode a key reference point for South Asian fiction in English. Feminist critics have questioned whether this skepticism serves everyone equally. Waugh (1989) asks whether postmodern dissolutions of authority and subjectivity suit women whose histories and selves have not yet been fully written. If a history was never constructed, there is little to deconstruct, and the task may be as much to tell as to doubt. This tension is useful for reading Mansab, whose novel keeps drawing attention to storytelling while also treating stories as the only vehicle some women's pasts have had. Two gaps follow. Most work on historiographic metafiction concerns public, national, or institutional history. Mansab's novel turns the same self-awareness toward intimate and oral transmission, from woman to woman. And metafiction is usually discussed in literary or experimental novels, rarely in a thriller, where self-reflexivity is less expected.

3. Postmemory and intergenerational transmission

Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012) coined postmemory to describe the relation of later generations to experiences that preceded their births but were transmitted so deeply, through stories, images, and silences, that they shape the descendants' own sense of self. Postmemory is mediated by imaginative investment rather than direct

recollection. Hirsch's earlier work on the mother–daughter plot (1989) also shows that she has long been attentive to how feminine bonds structure narrative, a link that matters for Mansab's novel. Scholars have extended the concept beyond its Holocaust origins. Michael Rothberg (2009) argues that memories of different histories can interact productively instead of competing, and critics of Partition literature have applied postmemory to second- and third-generation narratives. A recurring difficulty is that postmemory usually presupposes a reasonably well-documented event whose shape the later generation inherits. Mansab's protagonist inherits something less defined: a recurring dream, a message she cannot hear, a lineage whose content is uncertain. The present study asks what postmemory looks like when what is transmitted is, in part, the fact of being unable to receive it.

4. Detective fiction and the problem of closure

Tzvetan Todorov's (1977) account of the detective story, which contains two narratives, an absent story of the crime and a present story of the investigation, remains the standard structural model. Peter Brooks (1984) treats the detective plot as an exemplary case of narrative's reliance on retrospective reconstruction and its desire for a final meaning. The classical form, on this view, moves toward explanation and restored order. Later critics emphasise how the genre can resist that movement. Michael Holquist (1971) and the contributors to Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's collection (1999) describe the "metaphysical detective story," in which the investigation fails, doubles back, or turns on the act of interpretation itself. Postcolonial writers have used similar structures. Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), for example, reads as a mystery whose real object is the suppressed knowledge of colonized people. Feminist criticism adds a further layer. Kathleen Gregory Klein (1988) argues that the conventions of the genre, with their isolated and authoritative investigator, sit uneasily with women's agency, so the woman detective forces the form to change. What remains underexamined is how a mystery can be organised around symbolic and narrative evidence, such as parables and inherited images, rather than physical clues, and what that does to the genre's promise of closure.

5. Anglophone Pakistani fiction and women's histories

Foundational surveys by Tariq Rahman (1991) and Muneeza Shamsie (2017) trace the development of Pakistani writing in English and its negotiation of language, class, and nation. Cara Cilano's work (2011, 2013) examines how Pakistani fiction has treated national identity, particularly the 1971 war, a history that official narratives have often avoided. Much of the field, however, has been organised around nation, Partition, and, since 2001, political violence and Muslim identity.

Women's writing has been central throughout. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988; published in the US as *Cracking India*) renders Partition through a child's eyes, and Ambreen Hai (2000) has analysed how the novel's treatment of the ayah complicates its feminism. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989) approaches family and memory through fragmentary, self-conscious memoir. Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) and *Kartography* (2002) rework family lore across the ruptures of 1947 and 1971, treating inherited stories as both precious and unreliable, and *Burnt Shadows* (2009) widens the frame to several continents. Aamina Ahmad's *The Return of Faraz Ali* (2022) uses a mystery structure to expose what the state and family conceal in Lahore's Heera Mandi. Taken together, these works show English-language fiction acting as an archive of women's experience. Three things are less examined. The first is the relationship between women's oral histories and a popular genre such as the thriller. The second is the transnational setting, where the investigation begins in an American university and reaches back to Pakistan. The third is the particular place of Sufi story within this tradition. Recent scholarship on contemporary Pakistani women's fiction has begun to read 2024 novels as sites of resistance to patriarchal order, chiefly through thematic, spatial, and environmental lenses. Bibi, Shaheen, and Qamar (2025a) read Shazaf Fatima Haider's *A Woman on a Suitcase* through postcolonial feminism and critical spatial theory, arguing that the protagonist's movement out of the

joint family home enacts spatial resistance to a patriarchal order that fixes female identity. In a companion study of Feryal Ali Gauhar's *An Abundance of Wild Roses*, the same authors (2025b) argue through ecofeminism that the degradation of land and the subjugation of women follow a single logic, and that the suppression of women's ecological knowledge is a condition of extraction. These studies show that women's agency and women's knowledge are live concerns in the field, and the second treats silencing as epistemic as well as social. Yet both attend chiefly to what the novels represent rather than to how narrative form carries women's histories. The second notes the Spirit-Beings' narrative voice but reads it as an ecological counter-epistemology, not as a metafictional or archival device. Neither addresses memory or the archive as such, and that is the gap the present study takes up.

6. Sufi storytelling and women's oral traditions

Annemarie Schimmel's (1975) survey of Islamic mysticism remains the standard introduction to Sufi thought, including its habit of conveying truth through parable, image, and indirection. Work on women and Sufism has recovered a presence that conventional histories understate: Rkia Cornell (1999) presents the biographies of early Sufi women, and Sa'diyya Shaikh (2012) examines gender and intimacy in Sufi thought. Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (1998) show how women participate in saint cults and devotional life in South Asia, often outside formal institutions. Related scholarship on women's storytelling more broadly treats the story as a tool of survival and counter-authority. Fatima Mernissi (1994) recalls the tales told in a women's world that shaped her, and Marina Warner (2012) reads the Scheherazade tradition as storytelling that buys time and shapes power. Together these works support the view that women have often been custodians of narrative traditions, and that the "old wives' tale" is a category worth contesting. What literary criticism has done less is treat Sufi story, within contemporary fiction, as an archival form for women's histories: a way of keeping what formal records do not. That is the move this paper makes with Mansab's novel. The review suggests five conclusions. Scholarship on the gendered archive explains why women's histories are lost and why recovery is ethically delicate, but it focuses on non-fiction testimony. Metafiction theory explains how novels foreground narration, but it is usually tied to public history and to literary rather than genre fiction. Postmemory explains inheritance, but it presupposes a documented event. Detective criticism explains the genre's drive toward closure and its resistance, but it rarely addresses mysteries built on symbolic evidence. Studies of Anglophone Pakistani fiction map the tradition of women's historical writing but have not yet considered a Sufi-inflected thriller. The present study brings these strands together in a single close reading. Its contribution is to show how *The Sufi Storyteller* uses detective structure and metafictional self-awareness to preserve women's histories while making the partial nature of that recovery visible, and to argue that the novel's treatment of forgiveness proposes a way of knowing the past that evidence alone cannot provide.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study is a qualitative, text-based literary analysis. Its aim is interpretive rather than statistical: to explain how the formal features of one novel produce meaning about women's histories, memory, and the limits of recovery. A single-text design suits the argument because the claim concerns how particular devices work together, namely a murder plot, a storytelling frame, and a search that runs between women of different generations. That interaction is best shown through sustained close reading rather than a survey of many works. The primary text is Faiqa Mansab's *The Sufi Storyteller* (2025), and all references are to a single edition, cited by chapter and page. Fixing the edition matters because the novel has appeared through several publishers and regional editions, and pagination differs between them. The analysis combines close reading with structural narratology. Close reading attends to language, imagery, symbol, and recurring motifs, such as dreams, objects that carry symbolic weight, and scenes of storytelling, and it treats the text's own vocabulary of telling, hearing, concealing, and interpreting as evidence. Narratological analysis examines how

the story is organized: who narrates and from what position, how the plot is sequenced, when information is withheld or released, and how embedded stories relate to the main narrative.

The procedure has four stages. The first map the structure, charting the investigative line, the embedded tales, and the points where the narrative reflects on its own telling. Then trace three clusters of evidence across the novel: moments of metafictional self-reference, clues and symbols that function as a language to be interpreted, and scenes of transmission or failed transmission between women. Each cluster is read against the concepts described below, asking what the concept explains and where the novel complicates it. Finally, look for passages that resist such as apparent closure or full disclosure, and consider whether they weaken or refine the claim that recovery remains partial. Secondary sources serve three purposes. They supply theory, context on Anglophone Pakistani fiction, Sufi storytelling, and women's oral traditions, and evidence of reception. Reviews and publisher descriptions are used cautiously, as evidence of how the novel has been received and not as authority on its interpretation. Because the novel is very recent, sustained academic criticism is limited, so the study's authority rests on its close reading and the strength of its framework. The study makes no claim about Anglophone Pakistani fiction as a whole, though its conclusions may suggest directions for comparative work, and it addresses the text as published rather than authorial intention or interviews. It also reads in English a work that draws on traditions rooted in other languages and cultural settings, which is treated as part of the object of study rather than a neutral condition. An ethical point shapes the method as well. Spivak's warning about speaking for the subaltern applies to criticism as much as to fiction, since a critic who claims to "recover" women's voices through a novel risks the ventriloquism the novel itself is concerned with.. The first is the gendered archive. Trouillot (1995) argues that silences enter history at several stages, from the creation of sources to the assignment of significance after the fact, and Butalia (1998) and Das (2007) show that South Asian women's memory of violence and loss is carried in testimony, silence, gesture, and everyday speech rather than in official documents. Which is used to ask what the novel presents as missing from conventional records, and where it locates those histories instead.

The second concerns the limits of speaking for others. Spivak's (1988) question whether the subaltern can speak supplies an ethical lens for judging whether the novel claims to restore a silenced voice or admits that its recovery is mediated and partial. Hartman's (2008) critical fabulation, which narrates the gaps in an archive while conceding that they cannot be filled, offers a comparison for what the novel may be doing. The third is historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon (1988) describes fiction that is openly aware of its own construction while engaging with history, showing that the past is known through narratives rather than simply retrieved, and Waugh (1984) defines metafiction more broadly as fiction that foregrounds its own artifice. These concepts guide the reading of the storytelling frame, where tales, a course on stories, and acts of interpretation comment on narration itself. There is Waugh's (1989) feminist qualification: for histories not yet fully told, self-reflexive scepticism can sit uneasily with the need to tell. The question is whether the novel reconciles the two. The fourth is postmemory. Hirsch (1997, 2012) uses it to describe how later generations carry experiences they did not live through, transmitted by stories, images, and silences so strongly that they shape the descendant's sense of self, and her earlier work on the mother–daughter plot (1989) bears on the novel's interest in women's lineage. The novel's inheritance may be less defined than the documented events postmemory usually addresses, so the analysis asks what the concept becomes when what is transmitted is partly the inability to receive it. The fifth is detection and closure. Todorov's (1977) two-story model and Brooks's (1984) account of plot as retrospective reconstruction driven by a desire for meaning give the structural vocabulary for the mystery, while work on the metaphysical detective story (Holquist 1971; Merivale and Sweeney 1999) describes forms in which the investigation turns on interpretation and may withhold resolution. How the investigation works as a search for meaning rather than only for a culprit, and how it relates to the genre's promise of an answer. The sixth is Sufi story as indirect knowledge. Scholarship on Sufi thought (Schimmel 1975) stresses parable, image, and indirection as ways of conveying truths that resist direct statement, and work on women in Sufi tradition (Cornell 1999; Shaikh 2012; Werbner and Basu

1998), together with studies of women's storytelling (Mernissi 1994; Warner 2012), supports reading story as a form through which women have preserved and exercised knowledge. This lets me treat the novel's symbolic clues and storytelling tradition as a culturally grounded way of knowing rather than a decorative layer on a thriller, while keeping in view that the novel is written in English for an international readership, which shapes how these traditions are presented.

The framework is deliberately cumulative. The archive concept explains what is at stake, metafiction and detection describe the novel's formal means, postmemory describes the relationship through which knowledge passes, and the Sufi concept grounds those means in a specific tradition. Spivak and Hartman keep the analysis honest about the limits of recovery, which is the point on which the thesis finally rests.

Analysis and Discussion

The novel's early chapters establish its central problem before they establish its plot. A woman's body is found in a university library, yet the narrative keeps turning away from the corpse toward a different absence. Todorov's (1977) classical model holds that a detective narrative joins two stories, an absent story of the crime, which must be reconstructed, and a present story of the investigation, which unfolds on the page. Mansab complicates that model by giving the absent story two layers. One is the murder in Layla's office, which the police will investigate. The other is Layla's own origin, which no authority is investigating at all. The narrator calls her "an expert on parsing stories" who may at last have found "the beginning of her own story" (p. 12). The first story supplies the plot's urgency, but the second supplies its stakes, and the early chapters work to make readers feel that the dead woman and the missing mother are linked. In a conventional mystery the investigator stands outside the crime. Here the investigator is already inside it, and the ordinary distance between detective and case collapses into the question of what a daughter can know about the woman she lost.

The nightmare that opens the day on which the novel's real investigation begins condenses this problem. Layla has had it since she was nine. A tall, tearful woman whispers something she cannot make out, and the narrator observes that if she could only understand the woman, she would "have her answer" (p. 9). The image belongs to what Butalia (1998) calls the other side of silence. Writing on the women of Partition, Butalia argues that what families and survivors decline to say is itself a kind of evidence, and that a history can be present in the very manner of its suppression. The whisper fits this description exactly, a message addressed to a listener who has been given no means of receiving it. When a fragment finally surfaces, it is an instruction to be "silent and strong" like a mountain with deep roots (p. 11), and the narrator adds that silence "had been instilled in her long ago" (p. 10). What passes down is therefore not a narrative but a discipline of not speaking. Das (2007) argues that knowledge of violence and loss is lodged in everyday speech, gesture, and the body rather than in testimony proper, and Layla's inheritance is of this kind. It has been absorbed so completely that it governs how she prays, how she works, and how she answers her own grief.

Hirsch's (1997, 2012) concept of postmemory is the obvious frame, and it is useful partly because it reaches its limit here. Postmemory describes how later generations carry experiences they did not live, transmitted through stories, images, and silences so forcefully that they shape the descendant's identity, and Hirsch stresses that this connection is mediated by imaginative investment rather than recollection. Layla's dream fits the description, but her situation departs from the cases Hirsch usually treats. Those cases presuppose a documented event whose outline the descendant can eventually learn. Layla was separated from her mother as a child and raised by an adoptive mother, and she cannot tell whether the whisper is "dream memory, or life memory" (p. 11). What is transmitted to her is the experience of being unable to receive the message. Layla describes her mother as having abandoned her and spends her life pursuing "the happy ending of her abandoned story" (p. 11). Yet the same chapter preserves a sensory memory that complicates this reading. The smell of coffee at an American consulate, twenty-three years earlier, is for her "the smell of safety," and the narrator asks why, if it was not safety, her mother "had sobbed with relief" (p. 12). The detail

is small, but it places contradictory evidence inside Layla's own account. The woman who left may have been a woman who rescued, and the grievance that organizes Layla's adult life may rest on a story that is incomplete. This is a mystery device in the strict sense, a clue that does not fit the working theory, and it is also a statement about how women's histories are handled. Brooks (1984) describes plot as driven by a desire for an ending that will confer meaning on everything before it, and Layla's desire for a "happy ending" is exactly that. The novel lets the reader see that the ending she wants may require her to revise the beginning.

Layla's divided self reinforces the point. The narrator speaks of a "schism" between her scholar's mind and "the wounded part of her selfhood" (p. 10), and Layla keeps the two fenced apart. Her scholarship is effectively an archive built around a missing centre. She has written on the history of fables, on the techniques and canon of women's storytelling, and on Sufi stories across cultures (p. 13), yet the one story she most needs to read remains closed to her. Trouillot's (1995) account of how silences enter history is relevant because it locates the gap at the moment of production. A source may never be created, an archive may never gather it, and a narrative may never retrieve it, and in Layla's case all three failures converge on a single life. The expert on other people's archives is herself the product of a gap in hers. The classroom scene that follows turns this thematic argument into metafiction. When students press her about the body in her office, Layla declines to speculate, saying she does not know "the whole of it yet" (p. 16), and she redirects them to a question about why people yearn for stories. The refusal is a narratological statement. She separates facts, which belong to law enforcement, from the harder task of learning "to extricate facts from fiction, and truth from both." Hutcheon's (1988) historiographic metafiction describes precisely this suspicion, the recognition that the past reaches us only through constructed narratives and that the boundary between fact and fiction is never clean. The novel does not leave the point implicit. When a student names mise en abyme, Layla confirms that stories nested within stories, from the Arabian Nights to the Conference of the Birds, work by mirroring (pp. 17–18). A scene in a novel about nested stories explains nested stories, and the reader is invited to apply the concept to the book in hand. Waugh's (1984) definition of metafiction as writing that lays bare its own artifice applies, but here the exposure has a purpose beyond display, since it trains the reader in the interpretive habits the mystery will demand. The same scene supplies an almost explicit statement of the gendered archive. While explaining a Sufi legend of a spiritual Pole supported by four pillars, Layla is asked by Gul whether those figures were always men. Her answer is that she doubts it but that "it is a legend, and we cannot know" (p. 20). She adds that when she first began to study stories she wondered how they were preserved, and "who were these people making sure they were passed on" (p. 20). This is Trouillot's argument in miniature. The record of who carried a tradition is itself a product of who was allowed to be recorded, and the protagonist, a specialist in exactly this question, concedes that she cannot fill the gap by assertion. Her next remark, that stories "change their face but the bones remain" (p. 20), is her working theory of how knowledge survives without a formal archive. The surface adapts to each age while a core persists, and she goes on to link this persistence with "old wives' tales and songs" (p. 21). The phrase is the one that Western culture uses to discredit women's knowledge, and here it appears as the name for the channel through which that knowledge has travelled.

Layla's account is not left unchallenged, and the challenge matters. Gul objects that readers from different cultures cannot take the same lesson from a Sufi tale, since a donkey signifies cruelty and helplessness to someone who knows how the animal is treated in the Middle East and Asia and merely an exotic creature to an American student (p. 18). She asks how anyone can know what a story means without its traditions, its morality, and its humour. Layla replies that the listener's identity does not matter to the story, though the story matters to the development of the reader, and she concedes that tales are altered through "recensions and expurgations" to suit shifting regimes (p. 19). Two positions are in tension. Gul's insistence on context echoes Spivak's (1988) warning about who is entitled to interpret and to speak for whom, and Layla's emphasis on the reader's growth reflects the Sufi view that a teaching story yields meaning according to the stage of its listener. Her own concession that every transmission edits what it carries undercuts her

confident claim, a few minutes later, that stories "will never be a victim" of the world's bias (p. 22). The novel lets both claims stand, and I read the unresolved tension as deliberate. It models the interpretive humility that Hartman's (2008) critical fabulation requires, telling the story while declaring that the telling is partial. The question that Layla poses about the scorpion and the frog, "Which canon can truly claim it?" (p. 22), can be asked of any woman's history in the same way, since the stories that preserve it have no single owner and are therefore vulnerable to whoever tells them next.

That scorpion fable repays a closer look, because it seems to prefigure the novel's moral problem. The scorpion stings the frog midway across the river and then asks, "Why are you blaming me for my nature?" (p. 22). Gul reads the story as being about free will, concluding that choices make us who we are rather than obedience to nature or culture (p. 23). Layla praises the answer, and the exchange sits directly beside her reflection that she was abandoned by the person who should have protected her most. The fable gives her a vocabulary for judging a mother's act as nature or as choice, and it does so before the reader knows what the act was. The novel is preparing the question that its ending will have to answer, namely whether a woman's history is something to be judged or something to be understood. The lecture and the private grief are interleaved so closely that the lecture becomes a displaced form of mourning. Mid-discussion, Layla's thoughts slide to her nightmares, and she reflects that no one escapes cultural traps without hurting those they love and that the world keeps "selling feminist princesses to the gullible" (p. 19). Her theory of why people need stories is also a theory of why she needs one. Her body is written as an archive in the same way. She wears talismans gathered from shrines across Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India, and she tells students that her tattoos mark the stages of her life because "her body was a sacred site" (p. 21). She also describes Sufi stories as talismans against falsehood. Where official records are silent, her skin and jewellery hold a record of passage, and the novel proposes that preservation can be material and personal as well as narrative. This accords with Das's insistence that loss is carried in the body, and with Schimmel's (1975) account of Sufi indirection, in which meaning travels through symbol rather than statement. Her restless travelling belongs to the same pattern: she saves her salary to journey through "Asiatic lands" in search of "what she had lost" (p. 23), and she looks for traces of Lahore wherever she lives, so that a backstreet in the American Midwest reminds her of the city she left (p. 12). The archive she assembles is geographic as well as bodily, and it is built from the diaspora's habit of finding the lost home in whatever place is to hand. The library where the murder occurred sharpens these themes by making the archive literal. It houses a temperature-controlled collection of manuscripts, letters, and diaries belonging to an obscure local writer, and the police have taken what evidence they could from it (p. 23). The scene is easy to pass over, but it sets two kinds of record side by side. The police gather physical evidence, which is the kind of record that official procedure recognizes, while the shelves hold the paper traces of a private life that no one has thought to read. On the notice board at the entrance is a poster for a talk on storytelling, with the face of Mira Heshmat. Layla has followed this woman for months, attending every talk, and she has never found the courage to speak to her. The chapter ends on two sentences that fix the novel's central uncertainty: Mira reminds Layla of the woman in her dreams, and Layla believes Mira is her birth mother (p. 23). The wording matters. It is a belief, held on the strength of a resemblance and a hunch, and the narrative never presents it as established. The novel places a woman's most important history in the form of a conjecture, which is how Hartman's archive of absences works, and it makes the reader aware that the conjecture is built from desire as well as evidence.

Hasina, Layla's adoptive mother, provides a second and quieter archive of silence. Layla visits her in Chicago under an unspoken rule never to go more than six months without a visit, and the phone call that arranges the trip shows a relationship governed by implication. Hasina answers news of the murder with "disappointed silence" that works as a reprimand (p. 25), and Layla, for her part, withholds the news of an earlier murder rather than worry her. The narrator explains that Hasina could never talk about her life before she came to the United States, because her memories "had been smothered by the violence, the hurt and the betrayal she had endured" and she had "internalized them and kept them locked up" (p. 31). Layla learned of

the forced marriage, the abuse, the divorce, and the loss of family support only as an adult, by assembling "snatches of conversations" she had heard growing up. The method is exactly what Butalia and Das describe in their accounts of women's testimony, a history reconstructed from fragments overheard rather than from any statement made to the child. The narrator adds that Layla understood this because she had "a similarly painful inheritance" (p. 31). Postmemory here crosses the line of biological descent. Layla inherits silence from the mother who bore her and from the mother who raised her, and the novel treats both as lines of transmission.

Conclusion

This paper asked how a mystery remembers. Reading Faiqa Mansab's *The Sufi Storyteller* through the gendered archive, historiographic metafiction, postmemory, and the theory of detection, it has argued that the murder plot carries a second investigation into a woman's history that no authority has recorded. Todorov's two stories, the absent crime and the present inquiry, are doubled here, which shows that detection can work as memory when what must be reconstructed is a life never entered into a record. Four findings follow. First, women's histories survive in forms official archives do not hold: the whisper in Layla's dream, an inherited discipline of silence, a handmade book of stories, Hasina's kitchen, and a body marked with talismans and tattoos. Butalia's view of silence as evidence and Das's account of loss carried in gesture explain why the novel locates memory there. Second, the metafictional frame is functional. Layla's classroom discussion of nested stories and of who preserved the tradition gives the reader the interpretive method the plot demands, in the manner of Hutcheon and Trouillot. Third, transmission between women is incomplete from the start. Layla inherits silence from two mothers, so postmemory here passes on an absence rather than a stable content. Fourth, the novel criticizes its own recovery. Layla's belief that Mira is her mother is held as a conjecture and examined as a possible mirage, so the book preserves women's histories by making their partial recovery visible, much as Hartman's critical fabulation does. The study has limits. It rests on one recent novel and on its opening chapters, so claims about the investigation, the symbolic clues, the meeting of Layla and Mira, and the ending need testing against the full text. Little existing criticism is available to check the reading against. Further work could take five directions: complete the reading and test each claim against the ending; study the walnut and the killer's note as a symbolic system alongside Sufi teaching stories; compare the novel with Aamina Ahmad's *The Return of Faraz Ali* or Shamsie's family-lore novels; examine how reviewers position a book that is both thriller and introduction to Sufi lore; and consult the author's own statements about her sources. For teachers, the classroom scenes make a good entry point, especially when paired with short extracts from Butalia and Das. For scholars, the study recommends treating storytelling traditions, and not only historical events, as archives of women's experience. The novel's model of memory is neither triumphant nor despairing. Some histories can be approached only through interpretation, patience, and a listener prepared to hear, and the act of telling and listening is how they are kept alive. The remaining chapters will either confirm or complicate that claim.

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