

What has happened to our city, our home?

A hundred beats

Sunday, October 21, 2007

Fatima Bhutto

Karachi is my city, my home. I was seven years old the first time I set foot on its soil. It had been until then an imaginary homeland, a figment of my dreams and thoughts. It was a home I knew through other's stories, longings, and poetry. On that first trip home, I knew I had fallen in love.

Our city, our home, has had many a facelift over the years. Cosmetic surgery courtesy of tawdry billboards and hoardings, sponsored chalking and graffiti, along with posters and pamphlets have often altered the visage of this city. This is not the first time our city, our Karachi, has been pockmarked by obscenity. It is not the last time either, I fear.

The face of the city may have changed, but its soul remains untouched. We are not the billboards of this city; they do not represent us the way they would like. They do not resonate deep within, the way a picture of Seaview in the summer does or the way the lush fuchsia colour of our bougainvillea flowers do. The hundred year old Banyan trees that line our older roads, the smell of salt from the sea, the noise of an un-muffled motorcycle that's us. That's a small window into who we are. This invasion, this personal assault on our Karachi, that does not remake us either. Before the siege of the politicians and the onslaught of the barbarians, this city was called Kolachi, named after Mai Kolachi a Sindhi fisherwoman. It was built by Baloch tribes from Balochistan, from Makran, and established as a fishing village and thus we became the city by the sea.

Before the goddess of the waters, before Mai Kolachi called this her home, Karachi was known to the ancient Greeks as Krokola. This was where Alexander the Great rested after his campaign in the Indus Valley. Karachi or Krokola was a port of calm before the madness that would greet Alexander in Babylonia.

Later, Karachi became a brief gem among the jewels of the Talpur crown. It became a port city, coveted by those near and far. Another invasion, no less grotesque and led by the equally grotesque Charles Napier brought our city, our home, into the Bombay Presidency. The

British, with little affection, worked Karachi into the ground. We were enslaved, made to open our harbour and our coast for the ill-gotten wealth of pirates. How little has changed, Karachi. How sad for us. But we are a jewel; we are to be envied for these shores. Kemari, Korangi, Landhi, Malir, how many men and women make up this jewel?

Parsis, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus how many faiths have congregated here to pay homage to the divine? How many wonderful strains of tolerance we did have here in our city, our home. Baloch, Sindhi, Punjabi, Gujrati, Mujahir, Pathan, Afghan how many brothers we have living here with us under the same sun. Unfortunately, we do not live as one, not as we used to. Divided by districts, neighborhoods, and hate, we brothers and sisters are not as fortunate as we once were. But we are here. We are this city. We, the men and women who live in Karachi, who have lived in Karachi, who work and struggle and toil through disproportionately large KESC bills, through hefty taxes ignored by those who should pay, through hartals, through bunds, through riots and death, we are this city. We are Karachi.

But again, once more, an addendum -- we are not the violence that is all too often and all too irresponsibly brought down upon us. That violence does not represent us; it does not represent us at all. Those who invite the violence, who relish in its chaos because it makes them seem grandiose and who wear it like an accessory of power and entitlement, they are not Karachi. They are not us. They don't know anything about us and the city we call home. Karachi, my beloved. How did we get to this? Milan Kundera, the Czech novelist and playwright, once said that the struggle between people and power is the struggle between memory and forgetting.

We remember, we Karachiites remember. We remember the early 1990s when there was fire on our streets and blood on the hands of those who claimed to be part of us. We remember Operation Clean-Up. We remember the targeted killings. We remember the police encounters across this city, our home. We remember when it was not safe to leave our homes, what it felt like -- a memory which is all too fresh for us - to be locked within our homes and have our movements, our freedom, restricted. Do you think we have forgotten? That power has overturned the people? Never. We will never forget what it felt like in 1994 and 1995 and 1996, how it pained us to see our city used as a gruesome battlefield.

We remembered this week what it felt like to be used. But Karachi, my beloved, your air still moves as slowly and languorously in October as it always has. Your people still fill the roads, riding on those

motorcycles, without helmets as always. You have not been changed. Karachi, my truly beloved, you are resilient in the face of so much ugliness.

Zeeshan Sahil, an Urdu poet once wrote of our city, our home, 'It is a lie that in Karachi, after the rain, the sprouting grass doesn't have blades deep green and soft. Or that the trees do not give shade without the help of clouds... With us in Karachi live birds who fly from trees through the sound of bullets and bombs; perch on walls; always they gather somewhere to pray. Our books don't wait inside cupboards for termites. Now our hearts swim these seas where once our eyes searched for golden flowers and our hands tear down the walls that once buried us alive'. This, like the calling of Sahil's birds, is a prayer for us and for our city, our home. Let us await the day that our hands tear down those walls, it won't be long.