Stretched Intimacies, Seditious Women: Colonial India and World War I in the Ghadar *Moment*[1]

Extended Abstract

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Abstract:

In 1915, the Special Branch of Delhi Police in colonial India reported to the Special Branch of Punjab Police about women in the river Jumna singing seditious songs about their husbands sent to fight the First World War, a colonial war which was not theirs to fight. In the same year, the Punjab Home Department Proceedings indexed the many petitions that women wrote to the British Government, praying for the release of their husbands from imprisonment, whose content was then destroyed by the British. Reading these two unrelated archives together against the backdrop of the war and increasing anti-colonial revolutionary activity in the Ghadar moment in colonial India, I ask: how can we read the effort to reunite the apparently normative family as subversive in this colonial context? In this paper, I build the concept of stretched intimacies to show how intimate relations were stretched and broken up within and across empire and unravel the labor women performed in regaining their intimacies and the site of anti-colonial resistance they created. Moreover, I build on feminist methodological practices to explore how we might explain the gendered destruction of certain archives by reading women's anti-colonial resistance present in others. Through these theoretical and methodological interventions, I argue that reading these two unrelated archives show how women were implicated in and resisted colonial empire. In our current politico-economic system, where borders, walls, and wars have continued to catastrophically destroy intimacies it is important to trace back this colonial logic but also find hope in the labor and resistance performed by the brave anti-colonial women from whom we can draw lessons for feminist praxis today.

In January 1915, Musammat Karaman Bibi of Jhelum, wrote a petition to the British Government of India for the release of her husband from imprisonment. In May of that year, Musammat Zenab Bibi wrote to the Government on behalf of her husband, Mir Hassan, praying for mercy. In August, Musammat Aehlin, wife of Mulk Raj of Amritsar District also wrote a petition to the Government, praying for her husband's release. These petitions, along with numerous others, were contained in the Part C files of the Proceedings of the Home Department under the Jail or Judicial categories. Codified and indexed, the documents display a neatness of

[1] By using *moment* instead of *movement,* I hope to push the limits of the Ghadar movement as a singular party with memberships and organization in which women have claimed to be absent or marginal. As I will show later, the Ghadar *moment* was "a charged moment of rebellion" (Loomba, 2019: 3) that intertwined the colonial crisis of the First World War (Tooze, 2014) with anti-colonial struggle, and whose macrohistorical narrative of grand history has silenced the labor that Ghadarite women performed in the families and beyond and the revolutions that they undertook.

the archive, the "material bureaucracy of rule." (Lowe, 2015) The content of the petitions themselves are inaccessible, however, because they were destroyed by the British government as they were not considered matters of importance. This gendered destruction signifies the nonchalance, abstraction, and violence of the archive, but this "production of legal classifications, cases, and typologies [also] actively document *and* produce the risks, problems, and uncertainties that were the conditions of imperial rule." (Lowe, 2015: 4; Stoler, 2002) Building on the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals,* "[w]hat would be incriminating enough [for the archive] to refuse to mention" the content of these petitions? (2020: 35)

Perhaps the answer or direction lies elsewhere. In November 1915, the Special Branch of Punjab received a note from the Special Branch of Delhi about the "[s]editious songs sung by women who go to bathe in the Jumna." (Punjab Police Secret Abstracts, 1915: 687) The song that was reported and translated emasculated the *firangi*[2] who had sent their husbands to fight the First World War, a war that was not theirs to fight and which had made them widows. It is my contention in this paper that we can read these two instances of labor—of the petitions—and resistance by the women singing the seditious songs to show how colonial empire was gendered and how women labored against stretched and broken intimacies and resisted colonial patriarchy. The heterosexual family is a normative institution, and transgressive intimacies are usually perceived to break the bounds of these norms and develop other forms of intimacies (Manjapra, 2015). However, in this context where the women try to reunite, or lament the breakage of, this otherwise heterosexual normative institution that was broken by colonial structures, I ask: how can we read the effort to reunite the apparently normative family as subversive in this colonial context?

1915 was a tumultuous time for the British, as had the previous years with constant revolutionary activity across the empire (Sedition Committee, 1918). But with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, anxieties around the stability of the empire were heightened. The threat of Hindu-German conspiracy, especially in relation to the Ghadar Party, the anti-colonial South Asian diaspora party founded in San Francisco with the explicit aim of returning to India and overthrowing the British, and its attempted uprising in 1915, was prominent (Ramnath, 2011). Moreover, the enlistment of huge numbers of Indian men in the British Army had ignited further anger amongst the Indian people (Sohi, 2014). Many Indian men across the British outposts globally had joined the Ghadar Party in their anti-colonial resistance against the colonizer. It is against this backdrop of instability that I read the two instances of women's efforts to reunite with or lament the broken intimacies caused by capitalist colonialism. Instead of reading the neutralized (Morgan, 2021) mention of the petitions in the index of the Home Department proceedings as mere descriptions, reading them together with the seditious song sung by the women reported in Delhi, I reflect on how the broken family reflects a "zone vulnerable to crushing nearness and *arbitrary* intrusion [of capitalist colonial violence] into the everyday" (Stoler, 2010: xvii, emphasis original) and how women labor against and resist it. Moreover, against this backdrop of anti-colonial struggle *proper,* by recovering the resistance and labor of these women, I seek to retheorize revolutionary activity by centering gender, labor, and intimacy.

In this article, then, I study the relationship of macrohistorical processes of capitalist colonial empire, anti-colonial resistance, and intimacy to show how all three are intertwined and gendered. Moreover, through studying this relationality, I am interested in how we might explain the gendered destruction of certain archives by reading women's anti-colonial resistance and labor present in others. By reading the index of the above-mentioned petitions along with the report of

[2] Foreigner, or specifically, the British in this colonial context.

the seditious song sung by women against the British government, I seek to unravel the labor women performed in regaining their intimacies and the webs of anti-colonial resistance they created. Through reading these different, seemingly unrelated archives (Lowe, 2015), against the backdrop of a colonial war and anti-colonial struggle, I hope to push beyond the limits of the archive that enables forgetting. In this paper then, I hope to show that women's anti-colonial resistance lies in their labor of reuniting intimacies broken by empire. In our current politico-economic system, where borders, walls, and wars have continued to break intimacies, separated mothers from children, and catastrophically destroyed kinship networks, it is important to trace back the colonial logic of breaking intimacies and kinship, but also to find hope in the labor and resistance performed by the brave anti-colonial women from whom we can draw lessons for our struggles today.

These women "dwell" (Burton, 2003) in the Punjab Archives and the Special Branch of the Police (Roberts Club) in Lahore, Pakistan, where I went to find *the* revolutionary woman, "with the gun in one hand and a baby on her back." (Mies, 1986: 175). As Maria Mies remarks, this "is the standard image by which the unity between national liberation and women's liberation is symbolized." (1986: 175) And this is true because women, although often neglected in narratives of anti-colonial resistance, have showed up as central to these movements as guerillas, messengers, and active participants (Gowrinathan, 2021; Brand, 2004; Fanon, 1965). At the same time, they have performed the gendered labor of cooking and caring for the collectives (Vázquez, 1997: 141; Loomba, 2019). While literature on anti-colonial movements have moved in the direction of recognizing women's irreplaceable contributions to the movements, it is even harder to recover women's personal revolutionary lives from the gendered archive to center those who were not "exceptional" or part of any revolutionary movement per se.

The destruction of the petitions highlights this obliteration. But at the same time, the seditious women of Jumna disrupt this mundane abstraction of the colonial archive. The purpose of the creation of state archives which I visited—of administration, surveillance, codification, and compartmentalization—is contrary to my use of the archives to unravel women's labor to show their involvement in anti-colonial struggle to rectify male-centered histories (Stoler, 2002; Lowe, 2015). Both archives I visited are not properly catalogued, and the conditions of the Punjab Archive in particular continue to deteriorate (Qasmi, 2014). When I lamented the destruction of the Part C files at the Punjab Archives, I was told that this was done because the files were not considered important enough by the British.[3] However, instead of accepting that statement as fact, I draw on my learnings from Black, Third World, and other feminist scholars who have dealt with this violent lack and have devised provocative ways to sit with the unknown, read, and reread the documents that openly hide the violence behind abstraction and numeracy (Morgan, 2021). As Saidiya Hartman importantly notes, "History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror." (2008: 9) In reading the two seemingly unrelated incidents of labor and resistance together, I also draw from Lisa Lowe, who

[3] This was also true for the Part B files, which were not destroyed but abstracted or hand-written. Some of the petitions were categorized as Part B and I had hoped to be able to find these in the Punjab Archives. However, I was continuously told that the files were inaccessible because the repositories that held them were in deplorable conditions or were in the process of shifting. Research Officers were sent to these repositories to try to find the files the I asked for, but they came back with hands full of dust and told me that the files were unavailable. On the two days I was given the chance to visit these repositories myself, the files themselves remained inaccessible. While this remains an unfinished endeavour, I do believe that the destruction of the Part C files speak of the violence of the archive themselves.

claims that "the practice of reading across archives unsettles the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development." (2015: 6)

This method is especially important to push against macrohistorical methods of archival strategy that have often perpetuated this absence by sustaining the silences in the archive by focusing incessantly on authenticity, facts, and evidence (Platt, 1981). Macrohistorical sociology has often neglected women as historical actors because scholars have posited that its unit of analysis is at the level of politics (see critique in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2005), systems (Wallerstein, 1974), or processes that do not deal with any people *per se* (Frank, 1998). "Mentioned in passing," as "catalysts of nothing" (Hartman, 2018), at first glance, these women, along with countless others who rake the indexes of the archives, as Hartman put it, are also minor figures in the stories of (often great) men. But it is by centering these minor figures that, in this paper, I utilize feminist methodological practices to read macrohistorical processes to show how colonial empire, labor, and anti-colonial resistance is gendered and intertwined with intimacy. My article adds to the growing comparative and historical literature on revolutionary women, anti-colonial struggle, and intimacy.

To this end, I will first outline the backdrop the First World War in colonial India and the increasing anxieties around that. Next, I will advance a theoretical intervention that brings together the notions of labor, intimacy, and anti-colonial resistance. I will center the song of the seditious women in Jumna and connect them to the petitions to argue that intimacies broken by colonial empire was a gendered process and both these instances show women's struggle to reconnect the intimacy or revolt against this breakage.

Someone Else's War: Colonial India and the First World War

Between 1914 and 1918, over a million men were sent to fight the First World War from India (Memorandum on India's Contribution, 1918: 3, 10).[4] Indian *sipahis*[5] were sent as "artillerymen, clerks, grooms, mule drivers and even labourers placed under military articles" and were not always the "infantrymen or cavalry trooper" contrary to the conventional image of the soldier (Singh, 2014a: 1). Most of these men had joined the army to sustain themselves, as some were previously peasants, "[s]ome of these men had been driven from the land, but most were willing labour migrants looking to make the most of the economic opportunities created by the colonial encounter." (Omissi, 1999: 1) Santuna Das claims about the Indian soldiers whose lives were deeply imbedded in the army that "few knew for whom or what they were fighting, except for those 11 rupees at the end of the month." (2015: 1269) Indian nationalists also propagated the belief that loyalty to the British would be duly rewarded in the form of great rights and self-rule post-War. (Omissi, 1999: 3; Singh, 2014a; Ahmed, 2016). But the cost of the war was crippling for colonial India, with Indians "at home [enduring] higher taxes, material shortages and rising prices to pay for [the war]." (Ahmed, 2016: 2)

The war, moreover, had demanded men and material from an India already highly discontent from the Raj in the previous years. Revolutionary activity and 'political trouble' riddled the British rule, such as the Swadeshi Movement, the 1907 peasant revolts, the assassination

[4] This total number includes both Indian and British men. However, the memo provides the breakdown of specifically the Indian men in each unit. As the memo reports, "with the object of conserving British man-power, Indian troops were largely used in the later stages of the war for the dilution of British units and formation." (7)

[5] Soldiers/sepoys.

attempt on Viceroy Harding in 1912, to name only a few instances of revolt since the turn of the century, and the war "with its unexpected length and grueling demands on men and material, transformed both imperial authority and colonial subjectivity." (Chowdhury, 2019: 2) The Indian army, which was drawn from the '"martial races'—the Punjabi, Sikh, and Gurkha soldiers […] whom the Raj considered masculine enough to fight side-by-side with, but who needed the guiding hand of the steady British officer to control their wild and child-like natures" were supposed to be obedient fighters (McLain, 2014: 1-2, see Singh, 2014a, and Omissi, 1999, page 2, for further discussion on martial race theory). Although, in the British imagination, the Indian soldier was supposed to "have no aspiration after independence, and seem to [have preferred] being under authority" (Singh, 2014a: 17) according to the excessive handbooks that were published and the training that was given, in reality, "extraordinary measures had to be introduced to preserve 'the fighting spirit' of the Indian Army." (Greenhut, 1983: 58; Singh, 2014b) The harsh realities of war led many to desert the army, write about the excruciation conditions, and some even wounded themselves deliberately so that they could be delisted (Singh, 2014b; Greenhut, 1983). In their letters back home, they "exchanged stories of sexual conquests, the exotic locales in which they fought, nightmarish scenes of trench warfare, and the pain of losing loved ones and friends." (Singh, 2014b) Singh claims that while the "overwhelming majority of Indian soldiers of the First World War did not […] slip immediately from the trenches of France to revolutionary activity. But they were not consumed by feelings of fidelity and loyalty either." (2014b: 351) A small proportion *were* successfully recruited by revolutionary groups who drew on the discontent surrounding the Indian *sipahis*' poorly repatriated loyalty to the British. The Ghadar Party, many of whose members were formerly soldiers themselves, appropriated the colonial anxieties around the War, claiming that "Germany was preparing to go to War with England and that it was time to get ready to go to India for the coming revolution." (Sedition Committee Report, 1918: 146; Ramnath, 2011; Sohi, 2014; D'Souza and Tirmizey, 2019: 99). The Ghadarites "declared that great Britain [sic] would be forced into war and it was a splendid opportunity to go to India, seduce the troops and start the rebellion there." (Deol, 1969: 99) They actively recruited soldiers by sometimes enlisting in the army again themselves and by inciting revolutionary fervor through pamphlets such as the following (Ramnath, 2011; Singh, 2014b): "What is the pay of the Indian military man? Ten or fifteen rupees! It is surprising that brave Indians should sell their heads to the Ferangis only for ten or fifteen rupees, while the whites get twice or thrice as much more together with rations, etc." (Punjab Police Secret Abstracts, 1915: 126) As Seema Sohi notes, "The party accurately predicted that the British government's promises that Indian service in the war would ensure greater equality and rights at home were insincere, and it insisted that Indian military service perpetuated the status of Indians as slaves to the empire and pawns used to slaughter the world's colonized peoples and reinforce the brutality of British rule." (2014: 153) This revolutionary fervor thus led to desertion, joining revolutionary parties, and the notable Indian soldiers' mutiny in Singapore which resulted in "99.5% conviction rate" by the British (Connor, 2019)

Even amongst those who were not part of any active revolutionary struggles, Indian soldiers (and colonial soldiers across the empire)[6] were not passive recipients to the hardships of the war. Scholars have noted the assumed silence of the Indian soldiers in the histories of WWI because the soldiers could not read or write (Das, 2015; Omissi, 1999). However, as Omissi notes, "the sepoys had been far from silent witnesses to the war they had helped to win." (Omissi, 1999: 1) The censored letters (which the soldiers sometimes wrote themselves, other times had scribed by those who were more literate), songs, and other visual evidence scholars have recovered have

[6] See Connor's "Dissent" for a history of resistance against the British across the empire during the war.

highlighted the soldiers' sentiments about the war, the "thrill, wonder, excitement, fear, terror, horror, homesickness, grief, envy, religious doubts – that the sepoy must have experienced as he encountered new lands, people, cultures." (Das, 2015) For example, Das highlights the song of Mulla Singh, who yearned to go back to India and eat *ghee* (butter) again after 3 years of imprisonment as a prisoner of war, and other letters, among other things, have shown warnings by the Indian soldiers to friends and family to not enlist in the war after experiencing its terrors (Das, 2015). Moreover, this evidence also shows how the soldiers pushed the racial and gendered boundaries. Along with this racialization that divided the manly vs. unmanly Indian, the *sipahi* was "considered a *race* apart: their perceived 'chaste abstention from racial sexual transgression, from hybridization and mongrelization." (Singh, 2014a: 17) Keeping "temptation" away from the colonial soldiers was high on the agenda for the British (Omissi, 18) Yet, soldiers wrote about how they "stayed out—sometimes all night" and how "some men abused the privilege," "became diseased" and were "flogged" (Omissi, 1999: 18, 82) "[M]ost soldiers," according to Omissi, "were prepared to seek sexual comfort where they could." (1999: 18)

Robert McLain claims that "World War I has much left to tell us about the indissoluble bond between gender and violence as conceptual guarantors for the empire's political and military power." (2014: 1) While much of this has been understood in regards to the construction of soldiers' masculinity and femininity, others have also read the gendered nature of the war through interacial sexual encounters and marriage (Maguire, 2021; Levine, 1998; Woollacott, 1994).[7] While the war constructed gendered categories of Indian men and heighted racial and gendered fears of intimate relations, within this backdrop of crisis, war, exploitation, and resistance, I am most interested in the intimacies broken up because of colonial war in the form of families that were left behind and that became a ground for anti-colonial rhetoric for women. Just like the colonial war, anti-colonial resistance has also been understood in masculine terms. As McLain argues, "the alchemy of gender and violence was indispensible not only to the establishment and maintenance of imperial power, but also to the emotional appeal of nationalist anticolonial resistance, whether in its "moderate" constitutional form or in the guise of bloody, revolutionary terror." (McLain, 2014: 2) Thus the masculinity of the Indian soldier was also appropriated by revolutionary groups such as the Ghadar movement which banked on this colonial crisis. But beyond the 'khaki fever,' fear of the protection of white womanhood, and the intimate transgressions by the soldiers who stepped beyond racial boundaries for love and sex, I argue that it is important to view the colonial war and its permeation into everyday lives as gendered for those women whose families were broken up. This case reflects not only the specific incident of the war, but also sheds light on the families that were broken apart from the war as shown by the petitions of the women whose voices were literally destroyed in the Part C file with which I began this article. So, "one may reasonably claim that the […] empires of late nineteenth-century Europe were always violent in varying degrees, but particularly at moments of inception, crisis, and dissolution." (McLain, 2014: 6) By reading the seditious song by women in Jumna together with the destroyed petitions, I hope to show that colonial violence was not exceptional when it came to its permeation into intimate lives of people, but that intimacies were *stretched out* and broken up because of colonial empire.

[7] Maguire shows how while "wartime encounters" across racial lines were sanctioned, "marriage of white dominion soldiers to 'respectable' white British women" was accepted and "was part of a normalising process of continuous settler occupation through emigration, which helped create and maintain structures of white supremacy and colonial heteropatriarchy." (471)

Draft Theoretical Intervention and Discussion

The intimate has many connotations: personal, sexual, love, affect, connection. Omar Kasmani, in his recent work, *Queer Companions,* translates intimacy from Arabic as trust and closeness (2022, 1). This closeness has been a domain of interest for colonial empires, as well, as Ann Laura Stoler has shown in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* "that race was a primary and protean category for colonial capitalism and that managing the domestic was crucial to it." (Stoler, 2010: 13; see also, Fanon, 1963, Bannerji, 2017, Hartman, 2018, Manjapara, 2014for more discussions around the permeation of colonial rule into intimate lives of the colonized). Lisa Lowe, in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), branches out from the notions of intimacy as familiarity and love to build on the concept to show, despite liberal colonial logics of compartmentalization and isolation, enslaved people, indentured servants, and other workers came into close contacts across empire. The concept of intimacy has thus been used by scholars to disrupt fixed categories and binaries to overturn compartmentalized concepts such as the public and private, and emphasize relationalities of scales (Pratt and Rosner, 2012, 1). It is this disruption which overturns flattened out and universal, male, and Eurocentric binaries such as macro/micro, global/local, reason/emotion, and more, and moves away from the idea of "employing terms that are not defined *against* one another but rather draw their meaning from elliptically related domains." (Pratt and Rosner, 2012: 2) In this overturning, Kasmani potently notes, that "intimacy blooms, if only haltingly and piecemeal, through critical affective relations, knowings, and obstinacies." (2022: 1-2)

I learn from these scholars who have used intimacy in a more traditional sense, that of love, affect, relationships, but at the same time, through highlighting how intimacy was *stretched* because of colonial empire, I draw from its use to show relationality between scales, the macro structures, and the intimate. Thirdly, however, I also use intimacy as a feminist methodological practice. In pushing to read the archives that are not related together, I want to show how they can be intimately connected, in that in this breakage of families and love, both these archives exhibit how the colonial structures and intimate lives were deeply imbricated. Intimacy, however, is also a fraught concept when it relies on the otherwise normative structures such as the site of the family that could be patriarchal, is advanced by the state, and is inhibiting as well (Pratt and Rosner, 2012). Feminist scholars have shown the unpaid labor, devalued reproduction, and violence that is deeply imbedded in the family (James and Dalla Costa, 1975; Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004). However, intimacy is also a source of comfort, survival, and love. Moreover, intimacy allows us to not restrict to the private domain of the household but relates it to macro structures. By *stretched intimacies,* I mean intimacies that were broken up as people literally were pushed within and across empire. In this sense, I sit with the women who speak themselves, or whose effort speaks through the petitions. As a feminist project, Pratt and Rosner claim that "The intimate directs us to an ethical stance toward the world—namely, an approach that neither simplifies nor stereotypes but is attentive to specific histories and geographies." (2012: 20)

In this article, I read two archives together: the petitions whose content was destroyed, and a seditious song sung by the women bathing in the river Jumna, which was reported by the Special Branch of Delhi to the Special Branch of Lahore in 1915, when anti-colonial struggle and the First World War marred the British empire. The petitions are by the women who sought to have their husbands released from prison in colonial India, while the song is sung by women who wish claim that the war was not theirs to fight and that their husbands have gone away because of colonial empire, as the two examples below show:

> Mayest thou be ruined to-day not to-morrow. There are widows in every house, for me have been sent to fight the Germans.
>
> For whose sake should I paint, dress and wear jewels? My husband is away, I wait him day and night and I shall die a miserable death.
>
> …
>
> May thy reign come to an end, Oh childless George. Whence has this childless *Firangi* come and whence has he brought his fleet. A new kind of George.
>
> My thy reign come to an end, Oh childless George. Thou has caused the young and valiant Indians to be killed, and it is thou who has caused them to be beheaded, cries my brother's wife. (Punjab Police Abstracts, 1915: 687)

As these examples show, through this song the women undertake a gendered critique of colonial empire. I argue that although they yearn for an institution that could also be otherwise considered normative, this forceful breakage of intimacy shows how colonial structures permeated into the lives of people. These *stretched* intimacies link the political economy of war, colonialism, and gender as they highlight a relationality and pushes beyond the micro/macro binary. The stretched out and broken intimacies show the impact of this relationality on women whose families were broken up because of a war that was not theirs to fight. Intimacy, in this sense, also relates to anti-colonial thought because it demands the endurance of a relation that was to become the collateral cost of colonial war. It is in this contradiction that lies the dialectic of the colonial world-economy and gendered intimacy.

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