

Dissociative Realism

When we met again, Abbas pointed out my disappearances, how our friendship is so much about leaving. He took the iPad that controls the speakers at the bar I was working in. He played a song by Caribou. I was cleaning glasses and prepping ingredients for the 7 pm cocktail rush, and the song disturbed me. The lyrics repeat “and you never come back”, “and you never come back to.” The song felt like an accusation. But more than poking, I think Abbas wanted me to feel what he felt.

Over a decade ago, we used to meet with a group of friends at the Grove Fish Bar, a chippie run by Emre Kazim’s family. We discussed literature, philosophy, culture, and religion. In other words, we were just some guys pretending we had it all figured out. In our cultures, there are many segregated spaces like this, either in coffee shops, basements, the corners of mosques, or in tea houses. But this wasn’t a boys club, there was also an inexpressible emotionality.

There’s a longing that is only coherent in an Islamic context. This is a longing to be reunited with God and end-bodied suffering. In our traditions, so much creativity concerns the expression of this separation. I can only describe this as a cosmic abandonment. If our original languages and homes are mother tongues and motherlands, then our original nations and beliefs are paternal patterns of control. Gestures of discipline and rules.

In London our fathers seemed to have just left us, their masculinities made redundant by a class system that did not allow brown and black men to fully actualise, they wore their identities like loose sleeves. Our mothers were tired, grieving and overworked, they carried emotions spread across generations and geographies. Even within our group, we couldn’t let our guard down. Before any of us were British we were Pakistani, Turkish, Egyptian, Somali, Iranian, and Sudanese. Even at the Chippie, we surveyed each other for transgressions. Who was drinking alcohol? Who was having sex? Who was turning away from Islam? Who was turning away from us? We roleplayed a Socratic symposium amongst all this repressed desire. Instead of acknowledging the shape of our ancestral hurt, and our intergenerational method of coping, we frantically read and discussed ways to access the Empire. If we just had enough institutionally legitimised knowledge, we would have access to the spaces that disallowed us. But the keys we sought were virtual and imaginary. The Empire, along with its system of defining, excluding, and othering foreignness was a far more direct paternal system of punishment than the abstract dread of

endless fasts and deferred desires. Our Islam, bundled with admonition and fear, was also poetic in how we channelled it towards belonging. But our God became less frightening when we faced neoliberal capitalism.

With time, Abbas became less interested in the content of the conversations at the Grove and more interested in what they meant to people. Perhaps the switch was already present in him from before, as a result of continual mourning. In the Grove, Abbas dissociated as he observed us. The solution to a problem is often within the problem itself. The problem was social alienation, not universal truth or legitimacy granted by the Empire. No matter how obsessively we read Kafka, or created myths of our identity through Jung, in other words, in theoretical conversation with books and chosen paternal figures, the platform that generated the problem was still intact. We did not have the resources to process our hurt, we were taught that knowledge and not emotional expressiveness was the solution. Without realising, we were recreating the intergenerational pattern of observing, dissociating, and finally, detaching from one another.

The problem was social, it was about race, class, legitimacy, status, acceptance, and more generally, belonging. We were Muslims with doubts and cracks. Getting together and having conversations in an echo chamber isolated from the origin of these issues. Abbas realised this and started to explore the behavioural relationship people have with ideas. This is one example of the dissociative lens, which I will explore with supplementary graphs, diagrams, and illustrations.

Abbas jokes, “Which version are you now?”, “Is this Arsalan 2.0, or 3.0?”, “Arsalan goes away and returns like a new Pokemon with different powers”, “Arsalan is like a Rubik’s cube, you never know how you’ll solve it”. Beneath the jokes, which were both sardonic and witty, there was loss.

At the start of Abbas’s last exhibition, the Brick Lane Foundation, we began a more regular correspondence. He invited me to the first site visit at the police station which would later become the Foundation. I was suspicious at first, initially of the idea of repurposing a traumatic site for art (considering art’s relationship with gentrification), but also suspicious of being invited to document Abbas’ journey through this maze, which, appeared to me as a strange nexus of gallery and community politics, feedback loops, gestures, performances, and receptivity. As an “art-idiot”, I quickly became aware of my difference. I was accessing a space again as the perennial freshie,

informed by a sensibility of naivety. I will later argue for a methodology of freshness, of freshening as a truly autonomous postcolonial modality.

In meetings with curators, I witnessed Abbas' ease at code-switching, which sounds ominous, but something which I later reframed as a kind of a "new-humanism". I was hesitant towards engaging with his work because I perceived his ability to transform into spaces and processes as something parasitic, dishonest even. But, as I came to learn, much of his work is rooted in spatial alienation and only through correspondence with others does this lessen. This sounds fancy enough, but he really just wants to feel less alone. Whereas I wanted him to be more "honest in his external self", he wanted me to be more "honest with myself in relation." In different ways, we were pushing each other to reconsider our relationship with identity. We knew how deeply we felt like imposters, unsafe even in our own emotions and subjective realities.

In our WhatsApp chats from that time, I insisted on a self that is essential and can be found in a state of nature. I wanted this version of oneness with myself. He was insistent, "there is no self". Are we just process, relatability, networks, complexities, then? We had many disagreements and Abbas often used theory to drive points. In his own way, he was pushing me to reconsider private creativity.

Abbas insisted that our traumas don't allow us to take safety in one self, in one home, and to construct a singular identity is a construct that only holds the trauma without releasing it. Consider all those people who construct ideologies on the basis of trauma – the result is a rejection of inquiry, a comfort in denial, they band together in their meanness. Also, consider this – our entire society is traumatic. Certain people experience the trauma of the everyday more directly, in a raw and unfiltered way. There's nothing safe "out there". The world is hostile, unequal, deeply unsafe.

Due to proximity to violence, my body learned early that dissociation is a coping that offers an alternative to reality. When feelings like fear, anger, harm, and despair, are too bodied, and the emotions can neither be enacted nor resolved, then the mind "splits" from the trauma triggers. You step outside because you cannot cope with what is occurring within you. There was no action that I knew of to externalise this event, to generalise or diffuse the intensity of the emotions.

When we met again, I realised Abbas and I had coped with our dissociations through different processes. By generalising the gesture of splitting and detaching, Abbas found a new body in the art industry. The traumatic mode of dissociation is synthesised with a vocation fixated on trauma-process. I slipped into immobility, cutting myself away from people. Pain, quite literally, was my only contact with my body; and it is what I sought as a remedy to dissociation. The dialectic of otherness, of building intimacy through difference, what Abbas described as his “humanism”, was foreign terrain for me. Abbas spoke about how after a decade in therapy, facing insurmountable differences between his therapist and himself, he was able to reach across and find connection, intimacy even. “If I can connect with someone so different to me, there is hope. I can connect with anyone then.”

In a culture that is traumatic, an age that is dissociative, in which disconnect, detachment, and denial are palliative cures to the mind-body split caused by instantaneous tech frenzy and the mad rush for dopamine, a new behaviour has quietly been emerging. That of dissociative behavioural aesthetics, and more specifically, to describe the wider psychological, political, social, and cultural phenomena we can use the phrase ‘Dissociative Realism’.

We are living in an age of coping, healing, releasing, and recovery. In this Realism, which isn’t new or real, the politics of relatability and behavioural processes are the art-object. The dissociative, therefore, is trauma-synthesised with the organs of capitalism; shifting, splitting, detaching, disengaging, and denying the singular body. The dissociative is a lens through which capitalism perceives itself.

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