



AREEZ KATKI: BILDUNGSROMAN

UXBRIDGE
**MALCOLM
SMITH
GALLERY**

Bildungsroman

An Introduction by Anna Miles

In March 2018 Areez Katki set off from his East Auckland home for Mumbai on a carefully conceived quest to trace his creative inheritance as the son of a Parsi Indian family with ancient Persian roots. First stop on Katki's fancifully named 'Bildungsroman' was his birthplace, an Art Deco apartment building in Mumbai's Sir Ratan Tata Parsi Colony, once home to four generations of his family. This restrained geometric complex (the same shade of deep cream as the linen he often exercises his distinctive embroidery over), became atelier and headquarters for a diasporic aesthetic adventure.

Katki's ruminations on what it means to be Parsi today are inclusive of small acts of kindness and the razed ramparts of civilisations. He travels to familial and spiritual locations in Gujarat, Calcutta and further afield to Zoroastrian heritage sites in Iran and Azerbaijan: He sits in the shade of the world's oldest cypress tree; partakes in a bottle of 'Parsi Cola' in Kurdistan; fearfully deletes gay dating apps enroute to Tehran; samples orange blossom sherbet; wears spiritual undergarments; swoons over a Victorian leather love seat; calls on weavers and tailors; dissuades himself from acquiring more textiles; finds his drawings of a Sassanian Temple to look much like Lego; returns to the village where his grandmother first taught him to knit; and lies on a divan in absolute bliss after a silk weaving lesson. His catalogue of cultural experiences is comprehensive.

Katki's approach to making work for the exhibition honours his inheritance of needlecraft traditions via the female members of his family and his consciousness of the political significance of craft practices. He notes the difficulty of recovering matrilineal heritage within Zoroastrian tradition; searching out stories of female deities and independent Parsi women. He eschews the more extravagant frontiers of Parsi textile tradition — bypassing sumptuous brocades, riotously embroidered silk 'Garas' and quilted bridal mantles — selecting to embroider over humble domestic cloths sourced during his travels.

Bildungsroman parallels Katki's grand tour journal, which conveys the sincere curiosity of an expatriate outsider prying into the closed Zoroastrian community with questions of gender, sexuality and politics in mind. The artist's alertness to the provenance of materials, motifs and techniques transforms ordinary household cloths and glass bead adornments into objects of rare gravitas.



The following are extracts from Areez Katki's personal journals, written during his travels over a nine month period.

Thursday 21st June 2018
Café Banyan Tree
Sofia Girls College Lane, Mumbai

"Sure, I know where that is – the Parsi Colony before Tulsiwadi, right? I knew that you were a Parsi within minutes," the taxi driver playfully claimed. Curious about how this assumption was made, I asked why and he replied, "Because of your features. You people have distinct faces. And the way in which you spoke to me, with that sweet tone. You said 'please' and 'thank you' in a manner only typical of Parsi folk." It was just after midnight in Mumbai and I was on my way back home after a dinner with some friends in Bandra. This notion of being associated with a distinct identity wasn't something I grew up with in New Zealand. However it seems to be happening a lot here. Taxi drivers, guards and shopkeepers have openly and warmly associated me with our ancient Persian clan. It conjures a sensation that I haven't ever felt back home in Auckland. Was it pride? Perhaps, though I'm just as proud to be a New Zealander. So it might actually be a simple, uncomplicated sense of belonging somewhere. Untangling these distinct threads from my genetic roots, however far across the Arabian Sea they might've spooled eleven centuries ago. For the first time in my life, I have arrived and started inhabiting a physical space that recognises me.

Wednesday 12th September 2018
Anahita Temple, Takht-E-Soleyman

Legend goes that before and after these kings arrived, this fire would be soft and aglow as a mere ember. However once a true monarch bathed in Anahita's water temple and made his way to the fire via secret passageways, it would miraculously come ablaze – flying around the inner sanctum where only high priests and kings would enter. The story demonstrates how there was once a balance between natural elements, when Zoroastrianism revered the forces led by matriarchal priestesses as well as their male counterparts. This has sadly changed quite drastically in present-day practices, where authoritative patriarchs now perform almost every rite. Rebellious priestesses around Yazd still exist today; only some from the community acknowledge their spiritual sanctity while most do not. Meanwhile the Parsi diaspora in India have not yet had a conversation about gender equality within their temple walls.

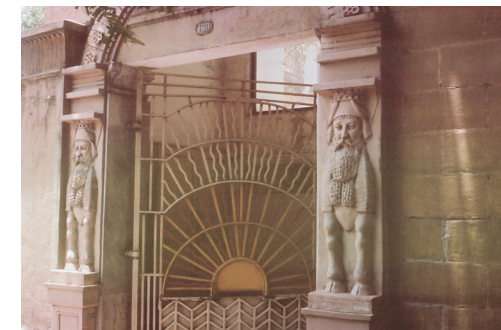
Thursday 18th September 2018
Persepolis, Naqsh-E-Rostam & Pasargadae, Pars

On my way to Pasargadae I saw things slowly vanish from my sight. I comically couldn't get this repetitive thought out of my head, '*Heritage – Heritage. This is what it means to be a Persian. These are our monuments and these are our stories. Mustn't miss a single thing. Or else Mum & Dad will be disappointed.*' As we drove, the diffused glow of a setting sun went from warm to cooler hues. Twilight is now upon us as I sit on the gravel facing the Tomb of Cyrus the Great. Barely made it in time. But here I am, paying our King of Kings a visit.



Saturday 22nd September 2018
Zoroastrian Sarv, Abarkooh, Yazd Province

A living, breathing mortal being – a growing organism over four millennia old. I currently sit under its shade, in awe of what the world's oldest Cypress tree must've seen. Perhaps wise beyond human comprehension and too grand in scale for images to do her any justice. Evergreen. Still standing tall and swaying resiliently against powerful winds.




24th September 2018
Chak Chak, Pir-E-Sabz, Yazd Province

Walking up the stairs and into the cave shrine was a silent, solemn moment. Slowly experiencing the sounds of birds, water dripping and the smell of moist rocks with green moss growing over them. I took off my shoes & socks, declining guest slippers because I wanted to feel the moisture on my feet. It wasn't slimy or stagnant as I expected the wet stone floor to feel. The smoothened granite was cool and my hot little feet were relieved from a day's drive through the desert. With wet cuffs and water dripping over my shoulders, I began to wash my hands and face. Then I stepped aside to do my Sudreh-Kushti prayers, facing East as it was still morning at this time. A small eternal fire was burning under a canopy of rocks, with offerings of sandalwood and frankincense that I was about to give.



Friday 21st December 2018
Parsi Dharamsala Balcony, Udwada, Gujarat

The village of Udwada feels petrified by time yet remains as this high point in every Parsi's pilgrimage to the eight Atash Behrams of India (plus that one in Iran, making a total of nine in the world). Beautiful paint-chipped villas dotted along the street, adjacent to the beach. Udwada's coast, where palm trees are harvested for their coconuts and some of those are used to make a delicious semi-alcoholic specialty called 'Tari,' – fermented between dusk and dawn. Iranshah's flame was bright and large but the new location due to reconstruction and renovations at the old temple have prevented me from remembering all those visits here as a child. Only when I closed my eyes and concentrated on the olfactory & audio senses did I faintly remember, this is what Udwada feels like. The village where Gran taught me how to knit under a canopy of bougainvillea, where we came for so many winter weddings and Navjote ceremonies when I was much younger.



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