

URBAN ALIENATION, FEMALE RESISTANCE, MEDIA AND TRAUMA IN IMTIAZ'S *KARACHI, YOU'RE KILLING ME!*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20813365>

Keywords

urban alienation, female resistance, media commodification, trauma narratives, journalistic satire, Karachi urban culture, feminist counter-narrative, postcolonial urbanism, intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins, violence and precarity, satire and resistance, South Asian fiction.

Article History

Received: 27 April 2026

Accepted: 06 June 2026

Published: 23 June 2026

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Abstract

Saba Imtiaz's *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* (2014) captures the fractured rhythms of urban life in Pakistan's largest metropolis, where the city itself functions as both backdrop and protagonist in a narrative of alienation, resistance, and survival. Through the lens of Ayesha Khan, a young female journalist negotiating the precarious terrain of Karachi's media landscape, the text foregrounds the intersections of trauma, gender, and urban dislocation. The novel situates female resistance within a city marked by violence, corruption, and patriarchal structures, while simultaneously exposing the ways in which media both documents and perpetuates trauma. This article explores how Imtiaz's narrative articulates urban alienation as a lived reality, how female resistance emerges as a counter-discourse to systemic oppression, and how trauma is mediated through both personal experience and collective memory. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's theoretical framework of intersectionality, alongside critical insights from Khamsa Qasim, Elizabeth Grosz, Angela Davis, Anika Mushtaq, Toqeer Ahmad, Leslie Kern, and Sara Ahmed, the study situates the novel within broader debates on gender, urbanity, and media representation. The article argues that *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* not only narrates the struggles of a single woman but also illuminates the structural conditions that shape female subjectivity in contemporary South Asian cities. Ultimately, the novel becomes a site where trauma is both narrated and resisted, where the city's violence is confronted through the resilience of female voices, and where media becomes a contested terrain of representation and survival.

Introduction

Saba Imtiaz's debut novel, *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* (2014), is a work that occupies a singular position in contemporary South Asian literature. Written by a practising journalist with intimate knowledge of Karachi's media culture, the novel follows Ayesha Khan, a young female reporter in her late twenties, as she navigates the chaotic professional and personal landscape of Pakistan's largest and most volatile metropolis. The text has frequently been compared to Helen Fielding's

Bridget Jones's Diary (1996) for its first-person confessional mode and its comic treatment of romantic misadventure, and the comparison is not without merit. Yet to read *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* primarily as a romantic comedy is to miss the severity of its social critique. Imtiaz deploys humor not as an end in itself but as a vehicle through which to expose the intersecting pressures of urban violence, patriarchal professional culture, media sensationalism, and the normalization of collective trauma. The result is a novel that is

simultaneously light in tone and politically weighty in implication.

The city of Karachi itself is the novel's most insistent presence. In the period during which the novel is set, Karachi was among the most dangerous cities in the world by several measures, a site of ethnic and political violence, targeted killings, extortion, and the daily disruptions produced by strikes, bombings, and infrastructural collapse. For the novel's protagonist, this is not background atmosphere but the medium through which all personal experience is filtered. Ayesha cannot schedule a meeting, plan an evening, or pursue a romantic interest without the city's instability intervening. The novel's comedy arises precisely from this tension: the collision between the ordinary rhythms of a young woman's life, career ambition, friendship, desire and a city that refuses to permit the ordinary. This collision is, in literary terms, a form of dramatic irony; the reader understands that what Ayesha experiences as inconvenience or absurdity is also, structurally, a form of violence.

The novel's engagement with gender is equally central. As a female journalist, Ayesha occupies a professional space that is formally open to women but practically structured to exclude, belittle, and surveil them. She is assigned stories that are considered appropriate for a woman; she is dismissed in editorial meetings; she is harassed while reporting; she is expected to perform a particular femininity that does not interfere with the functioning of a male-dominated newsroom. Her responses to these conditions are consistently rendered through humor and irony, yet the humor does not neutralize the critique. Rather, it intensifies it, the comedy of her situation depends upon the reader's recognition of the structural injustice that produces it.

Media, in the novel, is neither straightforwardly villainous nor straightforwardly heroic. Imtiaz is too careful a writer and too experienced a journalist to offer a simple morality tale about the press. Instead, she presents media as an institution shaped by the same forces of commercialization, political pressure, and patriarchal culture that shape every other institution in the city. Ayesha participates in this institution, depends upon it for

her livelihood, and is complicit in some of its distortions, even as she is also its sharpest internal critic. This ambivalence is one of the novel's most sophisticated achievements.

This article undertakes a sustained analytical reading of Karachi, *You're Killing Me!* through four intersecting lenses: urban alienation, female resistance, media and the commodification of trauma, and the normalization of collective trauma. The theoretical framework draws primarily on Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), supplemented by Leslie Kern's feminist urban geography, Sara Ahmed's work on affect and the feminist killjoy, Angela Davis's intersectional feminism, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Secondary scholarship from Khamsa Qasim (2017), Aniqah Mushtaq (2018), and Toqeer Ahmad (2019) provides contextual grounding within existing critical discussions of the novel. The article proceeds through sections on literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, extended analysis, and conclusion.

Literature Review

The scholarly reception of Karachi, *You're Killing Me!* has been shaped by two overlapping critical contexts: the study of Pakistani urban fiction and the feminist critique of media culture. Within the first context, the novel has been read as a contribution to a growing body of Anglophone Pakistani literature that takes the city, particularly Karachi, as both setting and subject. This body of work, which includes novels by writers such as Mohammed Hanif and Mohsin Hamid, is characterized by its engagement with political violence, social inequality, and the contradictions of modernity in a postcolonial nation-state. What distinguishes Imtiaz's contribution is its centering of a female protagonist within this tradition, and its use of the domestic and professional everyday as the scale at which urban politics become visible. Khamsa Qasim (2017) offers the most sustained scholarly engagement with the novel to date. Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz's *Bodies-Cities* framework, Qasim argues that Imtiaz reconceptualizes the relationship between urban space and female identity. For Grosz (1995), the city and the body are mutually constitutive: the city

shapes bodily experience while bodies, through their movement and habitation, produce urban space. Qasim applies this framework to Ayesha's constant movement through Karachi, through traffic jams, crime scenes, press conferences, and domestic interiors, arguing that this movement is never neutral but always inflected by gender. The city that Ayesha navigates is a city built for and by male bodies; her presence within it is both necessary (she is a professional who must move through public space) and transgressive (her movement violates the implicit gendering of that space). This tension, Qasim argues, is the source of much of the novel's comic energy and its deeper feminist critique.

Aniqa Mushtaq (2018) situates the novel within feminist frameworks of media representation, focusing on how the journalism industry depicted in the text operates as a site of gender-based exclusion and exploitation. Mushtaq draws attention to the structural asymmetries of the newsroom, the ways in which editorial authority is concentrated in male hands, the ways in which women's professional contributions are diminished or appropriated, and the ways in which the very stories that women are permitted to cover reinforce patriarchal assumptions about their capacities and interests. Her reading positions the novel as a feminist critique of media culture that is grounded in the specificity of the Pakistani context while resonating with broader global patterns of gender inequality in journalism. Toqeer Ahmad (2019) focuses specifically on the novel's use of humor as a narrative and political strategy. Ahmad situates Imtiaz's satirical mode within a tradition of South Asian feminist humor that uses comedy to make visible the absurdity of patriarchal norms. His analysis is particularly attentive to the ways in which Ayesha's humor functions at the level of form as well as content: not only does she make jokes about patriarchy, but the novel's entire narrative voice is shaped by an ironic sensibility that refuses to allow oppression to claim the dignity of being taken wholly seriously. This formal dimension of the humor, Ahmad argues, is where its political force resides. By rendering patriarchal authority comic rather

than merely criticizing it, Imtiaz denies it the gravity it claims for itself.

The broader theoretical context for this article is provided by postcolonial urban studies, intersectional feminist theory, and trauma studies. Postcolonial urbanism, as theorized by scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Ravi Sundaram, attends to the ways in which cities in the Global South are shaped by the overlapping legacies of colonial governance, neoliberal economic restructuring, and local political dynamics. Karachi is an exemplary postcolonial city: its infrastructural collapse, its ethnic heterogeneity, its extreme inequality, and its cultures of violence are all products of specific historical processes that cannot be understood through frameworks developed in the context of Western urbanism alone. Imtiaz's novel engages with this specificity, even as its concerns resonate with feminist urban critiques developed in other contexts.

Intersectional feminist theory, originating with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) legal analysis and developed most influentially by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), provides the primary conceptual vocabulary for understanding how Ayesha's experiences are shaped by the convergence of multiple systems of oppression. Angela Davis's (1983) earlier work on the interconnections of race, class, and gender provides a historical grounding for the intersectional framework, emphasizing that feminist struggle cannot be separated from struggles against economic exploitation and racial hierarchy. While the specific configurations of race, class, and gender in Pakistan differ markedly from those in the United States that ground Davis's and Collins's analyses, the structural insight, that oppression is always intersectional, never singular, translates across contexts.

Trauma studies, particularly in the tradition established by Cathy Caruth (1996) and developed by scholars such as Dominick LaCapra and Judith Herman, provides a framework for understanding the psychological and narrative dimensions of the novel's engagement with violence. Caruth's argument that trauma resists direct representation, that it returns in displaced, fragmented, and indirect forms, is relevant to Imtiaz's use of humor

as a mode of narrating events that, presented directly, would overwhelm both character and reader. The novel's dark comedy can be read, from this perspective, as a formal response to the problem of representing trauma: humor displaces and contains the affect that direct representation would release.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that brings together intersectional feminist theory, feminist urban geography, affect theory, and trauma studies to analyze Karachi, *You're Killing Me!* The frameworks are not applied in sequence but woven together throughout the analysis, since the novel's concerns are themselves intertwined.

The primary theoretical foundation is Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; revised 2000). Collins's work is centrally concerned with how systems of oppression, race, gender, class, sexuality, intersect to produce what she calls the "matrix of domination": a structure of interlocking hierarchies in which individuals occupy multiple positions simultaneously, some of privilege and some of marginalization. Collins developed this framework in the specific context of African American women's experience in the United States, but she is explicit that the structural insight is applicable across different configurations of power. The matrix of domination does not describe a fixed set of axes but a logic of intersection: wherever systems of oppression converge, they produce experiences that cannot be understood through any single axis alone.

For the analysis of Karachi, *You're Killing Me!*, Collins's framework is productive in several ways. First, it directs attention to the ways in which Ayesha's experiences are shaped by the convergence of gender, class, and professional position within a specific urban environment. Her marginalization is not simply a matter of being a woman in a patriarchal society; it is a matter of being a woman of a particular class, in a particular profession, in a particular city, at a particular historical moment. Second, Collins's concept of self-definition, the act by which marginalized

subjects resist controlling images by asserting their own perspectives and voices that provides a framework for understanding Ayesha's satirical narration as a political practice. Third, Collins's emphasis on knowledge production from lived experience situates the novel's first-person mode as epistemologically significant: Ayesha's narrative is not merely entertainment but a form of feminist knowledge about Karachi, journalism, and gendered urban life.

Leslie Kern's *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (2019) provides a complementary framework for analyzing the spatial dimensions of Ayesha's experience. Kern argues that cities are not neutral built environments but spaces structured by and for particular bodies, predominantly white, male, able-bodied, and middle-class. Women's presence in urban public space is historically conditional: permitted under certain circumstances, at certain times, in certain roles, but subject to restriction, surveillance, and harassment when these conditions are not met. Kern's analysis draws on feminist geography and urban planning to show how the design of cities, their transportation systems, their public lighting, their zoning regulations, encodes gendered assumptions and produces gendered inequalities. For Ayesha, these spatial conditions are immediate and material: the question of whether and how she can move through Karachi at night is not abstract but a daily practical constraint.

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and her subsequent work on the feminist killjoy provide an affective framework for the analysis. Ahmed argues that emotions are not simply internal states but social and political processes: they circulate between subjects, attach to objects and figures, and shape the contours of social life. Her concept of the feminist killjoy, the woman who refuses to perform happiness or contentment in the face of injustice, and who is consequently marked as a spoilsport and a problem, is directly applicable to Ayesha's narrative mode. Ayesha is consistently the person in the room who names what others prefer to ignore: the misogyny of an editorial decision, the emptiness of an official's statement, the absurdity

of a social expectation. This naming is what makes her a killjoy, and it is also what makes her the novel's moral and political center.

Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1983) provides historical grounding for the intersectional analysis. Davis's argument that feminist struggle cannot be separated from class struggle and anti-racist politics, that women's oppression is always also shaped by economic exploitation and racial hierarchy that translates into the Pakistani context as a reminder that Ayesha's gender-based marginalization is inseparable from her class position and from the broader structures of political and economic power that shape Karachi. Davis's emphasis on collective resistance, and her skepticism of individualizing frameworks that reduce structural oppression to personal disadvantage, provides a corrective to any reading of the novel that focuses too narrowly on Ayesha as an individual.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) informs the analysis of the novel's treatment of trauma. Caruth argues that traumatic experience is characterized by its resistance to assimilation: it cannot be processed as ordinary memory but returns in displaced, intrusive, and indirect forms. The survivor of trauma is, in Caruth's formulation, a witness to an event they cannot fully know. Imtiaz's use of humor as a narrative mode for representing violence can be read through this framework as a formal response to the unassimilable quality of trauma: comedy displaces and manages affect that cannot be directly confronted. The novel's lightness of tone is, paradoxically, a register of the weight of what it describes.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, text-centered methodology, drawing on close reading as its primary analytical practice. Close reading, understood in the tradition of literary criticism as the sustained, attentive engagement with the language, form, and structure of a text, is the appropriate method for a study whose central claims concern the ways in which meaning is produced at the level of narrative voice, imagery, and textual organization. The analysis is not

statistical or corpus-based; it does not claim to be representative of Pakistani fiction as a whole but to offer a careful reading of one novel's specific literary strategies.

The theoretical frameworks described above in which Collins, Kern, Ahmed, Davis, Caruth, function not as external templates imposed on the text but as conceptual resources that sharpen and focus the reading. Each framework is selected because it illuminates aspects of the text that other frameworks do not, and the frameworks are used in combination rather than in isolation, reflecting the novel's own insistence on the intersectionality of the conditions it depicts.

Textual evidence is drawn directly from the novel. All quotations are accompanied by page references to the Random House India 2014 edition. Secondary scholarship, Qasim (2017), Mushtaq (2018), Ahmad (2019) is incorporated to situate the close reading within existing critical debates and to acknowledge the scholarly context in which this article intervenes. The article does not make claims about Imtiaz's authorial intention but about the meanings that the text makes available through its formal and thematic organization.

Analysis

Urban Alienation: The City as Hostile Intimacy

Imtiaz's novel opens with an image that immediately establishes the terms of its engagement with urban alienation. Ayesha, preparing for another day of work, reflects on the impossibility of planning: "You never know if you'll be stuck in traffic, or if a bomb will go off" (Imtiaz 3). The sentence's casual coordination of traffic jam and bomb blast is the novel's first and most decisive tonal gesture. By placing these two things in the same grammatical structure, separated only by a comma, Imtiaz captures the central condition of life in Karachi as Ayesha experiences it: violence has been so thoroughly normalized that it no longer commands a register different from inconvenience. The alienation this produces is not the alienation of estrangement from a place one does not know, but something more corrosive, the alienation of being unable to trust the basic conditions of existence in a place one calls home.

Leslie Kern's analysis of how cities are structured for certain bodies and against others is immediately relevant here. Karachi's unpredictability is not equally distributed across its population. The specific form of alienation that Ayesha experiences, the inability to plan, the constant risk assessment, the daily negotiation of security which is shaped by her position as a woman working in public space. When she describes driving alone at night and notes that "Driving alone after midnight means you're either brave, stupid, or a journalist" (Imtiaz 89), the humor rests on the recognition that women's presence in public space after dark is culturally marked as deviant, requiring special explanation. Men do not face an equivalent scrutiny. The city's hostility is gendered, and Ayesha's alienation is therefore not merely urban but specifically the alienation of a woman in a city that was not designed with her full citizenship in mind.

The spatial politics of the novel are rendered with particular clarity in a scene in which Ayesha is stopped at a security checkpoint while reporting at night. The officer's question, asking why a woman is out alone at that hour, is not, she recognizes, a security question but a propriety question. It enacts the city's implicit code: women's mobility is conditional, and those who exercise it unconditionally must account for themselves. Collins's matrix of domination is visible here: the checkpoint is ostensibly a security apparatus, but it also functions as a mechanism of gender policing, applying to Ayesha a standard that is not applied to her male colleagues.

Yet the novel resists reducing Karachi to a site of pure hostility. Ayesha's relationship to the city is, as she describes it, comparable to that with "a bad boyfriend: it lies to you, cheats on you, and still you keep coming back" (Imtiaz 7). The metaphor is deliberately double-edged. It names the city's abusiveness without romanticizing it, but it also names the attachment that persists in the face of abuse, the attachment to people and places, to memory and community, that makes leaving not simply a matter of rational choice. Imtiaz is attentive to the ways in which belonging is always ambivalent, particularly in cities that are marked by histories of violence and displacement. Ayesha's

alienation is not the clean estrangement of someone who has no connection to the place; it is the more complex alienation of someone whose connection is real but whose belonging is perpetually conditional.

The city's class geography is also part of its alienating structure. When Ayesha reports from an elite press event and observes that "the buffet was five-star, the questions were zero-star" (Imtiaz 71), she captures a specific form of class-inflected alienation: the gap between the performance of order and modernity staged by Karachi's elite and the lived realities of the majority of the city's inhabitants. As a journalist who must move between these worlds, she experiences their discontinuity as a form of cognitive and emotional dissonance, a dissonance that the novel's humor consistently names and refuses to smooth over.

Female Resistance: Everyday Defiance and Narrative Agency

Resistance in Karachi, *You're Killing Me!* does not take the form of organized political action or grand confrontation with authority. It operates at the level of the everyday: in what Ayesha says and does not say, in how she narrates her experiences, in the professional choices she makes within a system that limits her choices. This is consistent with the tradition of feminist thinking about resistance that runs from Angela Davis's analysis of everyday forms of slave resistance through to Collins's concept of self-definition and Ahmed's feminist killjoy. Resistance, in this tradition, does not require a spectacular act of defiance; it requires only the consistent refusal to accept the terms that oppressive structures seek to impose.

The most consistent form of Ayesha's resistance is linguistic. Her satirical narration is, in Collins's terms, an act of self-definition: she refuses to allow her experience to be narrated by the controlling images that patriarchal culture applies to women in her position, the frivolous female journalist, the unmarried woman who has failed to fulfill her social role, the reporter who cannot handle serious stories. Instead, she produces her own account, one that is attentive to the specific textures of her experience and relentlessly honest about the structures that shape it. When she observes that

"apparently my uterus makes me unfit to cover politics, but perfectly qualified to fetch tea" (Imtiaz 62), she is not merely making a joke. She is producing knowledge about the gendered structure of the newsroom, knowledge that, by being articulated in this way, becomes available for others to recognize and act upon.

Ahmed's feminist killjoy framework is particularly useful for understanding the social dynamics of Ayesha's resistance. The feminist killjoy, in Ahmed's analysis, is the figure who refuses to perform contentment in the face of injustice and who is consequently marked as a problem, someone who spoils the ease of social situations by naming what others prefer to leave unnamed. Ayesha is consistently this figure. She notices the misogyny that her male colleagues do not register as misogyny; she points out the emptiness of official statements that her editors would prefer to report without commentary; she insists on the human dimensions of stories that the news cycle wants to reduce to statistics. This insistence makes her difficult, in the newsroom, in social settings, in her personal relationships, but it is also the source of whatever professional and moral authority she has.

The relationship between Ayesha's personal resistance and her professional practice is particularly significant. When a source tells her that a story about police harassment is "not for women to handle" (Imtiaz 78), she does not argue. She writes the story anyway. The act of publication is the act of defiance, and it is an act that uses the very institution that marginalizes her, the media, as its instrument. This is a key feature of Ayesha's resistance: it is not external to the institutions that oppress her but operates within and against them simultaneously. She is not a revolutionary; she is a journalist who uses journalism as a form of feminist practice, imperfectly and under constraint, but consistently and with effect.

The novel also depicts resistance at the level of personal relationship. When a relative pressures Ayesha about marriage, she replies: "I'm already married to deadlines" (Imtiaz 134). The deflection is humorous, but it also performs something more serious: it refuses the frame in which a woman's professional life is understood as a temporary

substitute for marriage rather than as a legitimate and chosen way of being in the world. By reframing her professional commitment as a form of devotion equivalent to marriage, Ayesha denies the relative's assumption that marriage is the primary horizon of her existence. This is micro-political resistance that is small in scale, easily dismissed, but consequential in its accumulation across the text.

Visibility, in the novel, is also a site of resistance. Ayesha notes: "They wanted my camera, not my opinion. As long as I recorded, I was useful. The moment I spoke, I was a problem" (Imtiaz 96). This passage captures the gendered limits of professional access with precision: women are permitted to be instruments of documentation but not agents of interpretation. Ayesha's refusal of this limitation is her insistence on speaking, on asking questions, on producing analysis rather than merely recording, is the form her professional resistance takes. It is not always effective; she is sometimes silenced, sometimes ignored, sometimes dismissed. But the insistence itself, repeated across the text, constitutes a counter-practice to the institutional norms that would reduce her to a camera operator.

Media: Commodification, Complicity, and Counter-Practice

Imtiaz's treatment of media is the novel's most structurally complex dimension. As a journalist writing about journalism, she is both the subject and the analyst of the system she describes, and she brings to her fictional account the kind of institutional knowledge that makes the critique specific rather than generic. The novel is not anti-media in any simple sense; it does not propose that journalism is irredeemably corrupt or that its practitioners are uniformly cynical. What it depicts, with considerable precision, is the structural pressures that shape journalistic practice in a context of commercial media, political violence, and endemic corruption.

The governing principle of the media system Ayesha works within is captured in the maxim she articulates early in the novel: "If it bleeds, it leads" (Imtiaz 29). This phrase, drawn from the jargon of tabloid journalism, names the logic by which news

value is determined: the more violent, more dramatic, more emotionally intense an event, the more likely it is to receive prominent coverage. The logic is not peculiar to Pakistan or to the period depicted in the novel; it is a structural feature of commercial media in many contexts. But in Karachi, where violence is endemic and the supply of blood is effectively unlimited, this logic has particularly severe consequences. It means that the media's coverage of the city consistently emphasizes its most violent dimensions, reinforcing a particular narrative of Karachi as a place defined by danger and dysfunction, at the expense of other possible narratives.

Mushtaq (2018) identifies this dynamic as a form of symbolic violence: the media does not merely report the city's violence but participates in its reproduction by giving that violence disproportionate salience and by framing it in ways that serve particular political and commercial interests. Ayesha is aware of this dynamic from within; she sees how editorial decisions are made, how stories are framed, how the demands of audience metrics shape what gets covered and how. Her awareness does not exempt her from complicity, she writes the stories she is assigned, she works within the frames her editors impose, but it does enable her to resist, at the margins, the most reductive tendencies of the system.

The most acute form of this resistance appears in Ayesha's insistence on including details that restore individuality to the subjects of news coverage. When she covers an incident of violence, she includes the victim's name, profession, and family situation, details that the news logic of the sensational would strip away in favor of the spectacular. These details do not change the story in any dramatic way; they do not challenge the editorial frame. But they change the record, and they perform a form of humanization that is the journalist's most basic ethical obligation. In a media environment that treats violence as spectacle, this insistence on individuality is a form of resistance.

The media's role in political spectacle is rendered with particular sharpness in Ayesha's account of press conferences. She observes: "Every press conference is a performance, and the truth is the

first casualty" (Imtiaz 118). The remark captures the ritualized quality of official communication in a context where power has no interest in transparency and where the media has learned to participate in the ritual without expecting disclosure. The press conference is a theater of accountability without actual accountability, a form, as Caruth (1996) would suggest, in which the language of witnessing is deployed without the substance of witnessing. Ayesha's refusal to treat the performance as the thing itself is her insistence on asking the question that breaks the ritual, is both professionally costly and ethically necessary.

The class dimensions of media culture are also exposed through Ayesha's navigation of Karachi's social geography. The gap she identifies between the five-star buffet and the zero-star questions at the elite press event points to a broader structural feature of media in unequal societies: the tendency of professional journalism to inhabit the spaces of power and to reproduce the perspectives of those spaces, even while formally claiming to hold power accountable. Ayesha's consciousness of this tendency, her awareness that she herself is implicated in it by virtue of her professional position, is one of the novel's most sophisticated self-reflective gestures.

Trauma: Normalization, Humor, and the Politics of Survival

The treatment of trauma in Karachi, *You're Killing Me!* is, in some respects, the most formally innovative aspect of the novel. Imtiaz's central challenge is to represent a form of trauma, the chronic, cumulative, collectively experienced violence of life in Karachi, that does not conform to the dramatic, event-centered model of trauma that dominates both popular culture and much academic trauma theory. The trauma that the novel depicts is not the single catastrophic event that fractures a previously stable life but the continuous low-level violence that is Karachi's normal condition. Representing this form of trauma requires formal strategies that differ from those appropriate to the representation of singular catastrophe.

Caruth's (1996) formulation of trauma as an event that resists assimilation and returns in displaced form provides a useful starting point, but it requires modification for the Karachi context. In *Karachi, You're Killing Me!*, the problem is not that violence cannot be assimilated, it is that it has been over-assimilated, so thoroughly incorporated into the rhythms of daily life that it no longer registers as exceptional. Ayesha's remark that "we learned to check the news before checking the weather" (Imtiaz 18) captures this dynamic precisely: violence has been normalized to the point where it requires the same kind of routine monitoring as meteorological conditions. This normalization is itself a form of trauma, a condition in which the capacity for shock has been depleted by overexposure, leaving behind a permanent low-level hypervigilance that is exhausting but that can no longer be recognized as a symptom because it has become a baseline.

Imtiaz's formal response to this condition is the deployment of dark humor as a narrative mode. Ayesha's humor does not deny the violence around her; it acknowledges it while refusing to be overwhelmed by it. When she observes that "you learn to laugh at funerals because otherwise you'll drown in grief" (Imtiaz 145), she articulates the logic of this humor with unusual directness. The choice is not between grief and laughter but between laughter and drowning, between a mode of survival that maintains the capacity to continue functioning and a mode of full mourning that the conditions of life in Karachi do not permit. This is not a critique of grief; it is a recognition that full mourning requires conditions of safety and stability that Karachi does not provide.

The humor also functions as a form of political commentary. When Ayesha makes jokes about the city's dysfunction, she is not simply coping; she is also naming the conditions that produce the need for coping. Her dark observation that "in Karachi, funerals are more punctual than weddings" (Imtiaz 109) is, beneath its comic surface, a statement about the organization of social life around violence: violence is reliable, violence is regular, violence arrives on schedule in a city where almost nothing else does. The joke makes this visible, makes it available for recognition and critique, in

a way that a straightforward account of suffering might not.

The cumulative effect of chronic trauma is registered in the text through Ayesha's accounts of her own psychological state. She describes the exhaustion of constant adjustment, the way in which she has developed routines for managing risk, avoiding certain routes, checking in with family, calibrating her schedule around the city's patterns of violence, and the way in which these routines have become so automatic that they are no longer experienced as responses to an abnormal situation. This is, in the clinical literature on trauma, a description of hypervigilance: a state of chronic activation that is the body and mind's adaptation to an environment in which threat is constant. Imtiaz renders this state not through clinical description but through the texture of Ayesha's daily life, the small details that accumulate into a portrait of a person maintaining function under conditions that should not require this level of management. The trauma is also collective. Karachi, in the novel, is not simply the setting for Ayesha's individual experience of violence; it is itself a traumatized entity, a city whose history of political violence, forced displacement, and systematic neglect has left structural wounds that manifest in its built environment, its social relations, and its political culture. Ayesha's experiences are legible as expressions of a collective condition: what she experiences individually is what thousands of Karachiites experience in different degrees and configurations. This collective dimension of the trauma is important for understanding the novel's political implications: the conditions that produce Ayesha's experience are not personal misfortunes but structural features of a city shaped by specific historical and political forces.

Intersectionality: Convergence of the Novel's Themes

Having analyzed the four central themes in relative isolation, it is important to observe how they converge in the novel's texture. Collins's matrix of domination is not merely a theoretical framework applied from outside; it describes a feature of the novel's formal organization. Karachi, *You're*

Killing Me! does not present urban alienation, female resistance, media, and trauma as separate topics that happen to share a protagonist. It presents them as aspects of a single, integrated condition, a condition in which being a woman, being a journalist, being a resident of Karachi, and being a person who has been shaped by the city's violence are not separable experiences but dimensions of one experience.

This integration is most visible at the moments when multiple forms of oppression converge in a single scene or observation. When Ayesha is stopped at the checkpoint and asked why a woman is out alone at night, the moment is simultaneously an instance of urban danger (the checkpoint exists because the city is violent), of gendered spatial policing (the question is not asked of men), of professional constraint (her job requires her to be there), and of media's exposure of citizens to risk (the story that brought her to the checkpoint was assigned by an editor who did not consider the risk). No single analytical framework is sufficient to account for what is happening in this moment; it requires the intersectional lens that Collins's framework provides.

Similarly, when Ayesha jokes about her professional life as a form of marriage, the joke operates simultaneously as personal resistance (refusing the marriage-as-destiny narrative), as class commentary (professional women in Pakistan face specific class-inflected versions of the marriage pressure), and as a statement about media culture (journalism is not a job that permits the kind of personal life that the marriage narrative envisions). The humor is the form through which these multiple dimensions are held together without being reduced to any one of them.

Ahmed's feminist killjoy framework, in this context, provides a bridge between Collins's structural analysis and the affective dimension of Ayesha's experience. The killjoy's refusal to perform contentment is not only a political act; it is also an affective orientation, a way of being in the world that keeps the contradictions visible rather than allowing them to be smoothed over. Ayesha's humor is the affective form that her killjoy practice takes: it allows her to name the contradictions without being either silenced by

them or destroyed by them. It is the form that survival takes when grand resistance is not available.

Conclusion

Saba Imtiaz's Karachi, You're Killing Me! is a novel of considerable literary and political sophistication that has not yet received the critical attention its complexity warrants. Through the figure of Ayesha Khan who is journalist, Karachiite, feminist killjoy, Imtiaz produces a narrative that is simultaneously a critique of urban violence, a feminist analysis of media culture, a study of the normalization of collective trauma, and a meditation on the politics of survival in a city that offers its inhabitants no comfort and no safety net. The novel's comic mode is not a mitigation of its seriousness; it is the formal strategy through which the most serious aspects of its subject matter are made legible.

The application of Patricia Hill Collins's intersectional framework, supplemented by Kern's feminist urban geography, Ahmed's affect theory, Davis's intersectional feminism, and Caruth's trauma theory, has allowed this article to bring out the full range of the novel's political implications. Collins's matrix of domination reveals how Ayesha's experiences of alienation, marginalization, and resistance cannot be reduced to any single axis of oppression but are produced by the convergence of gender, class, profession, and urban violence. Kern's framework reveals how the city's built environment and spatial organization are themselves forms of gendered oppression. Ahmed's feminist killjoy illuminates how Ayesha's humor and her refusal of contentment are not merely personal traits but political practices. Davis's emphasis on the collective dimension of resistance reminds us that Ayesha's individual story is intelligible only within the structural conditions that produce it. And Caruth's trauma theory provides the vocabulary for understanding how the novel's comic form is a response to the problem of representing chronic, collective violence.

The novel's contribution to feminist urban literature lies precisely in its insistence that these dimensions cannot be separated. Urban alienation

is not a gender-neutral experience; female resistance is not possible outside the specific constraints of the city; media is not simply an institution but a gendered space of power; trauma is not only personal but structural and collective. Imtiaz's achievement is to hold all of this together in a narrative that is, at the same time, funny, readable, and formally accomplished. That achievement deserves sustained critical engagement, and this article is offered as a contribution to what one hopes will be a growing body of scholarship on a novel that illuminates the conditions of urban life in the Global South with unusual precision and care.

The novel ends, as it must, without resolution. Karachi is still Karachi. Ayesha is still working. The conditions that produced her alienation, constrained her resistance, commodified her trauma, and normalized her grief have not changed. But the record has changed: her narration has made visible what the city and its institutions would prefer to leave unseen. In a context where silence is the default and forgetting the norm, that making-visible is itself a form of political action. It is, perhaps, the only form of political action that a single journalist, working in a compromised institution, in a violent city, can consistently sustain. The novel insists that this is enough to matter, and it is difficult, reading Ayesha's story, to disagree.

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