In Sept 2009, I started filming my father rather obsessively. His memory contained clues to my history—a history that I feared could forever be lost. He narrated the last fragments as he recalled. An image stood out, repeating
itself, refusing to go. He is sitting with my mother on an afternoon by a sea, my mother dressed in red bellbottom pants. This image bore witness to a time before—a time when my parents were in love and shared the same worldview. I grew up seeing a mother whose transformations included choosing to cover herself as a result of her free will and refusing to be photographed because of her changing beliefs. This transformation was an inevitable part of her negotiation of the place where we built our home.

One morning she declared that she wanted to open an aromatherapy salon—this with no formal beautician’s training and her constant disciplining of me in my growing up years against “doing” things to one’s body. The salon was named La Femme, and was a block away from home, directly opposite the main mosque. It was a place where I regularly saw women happily contradict themselves—they invented stories to justify fashions and trends and wore the hijab as a part of broader strategies to negotiate freedoms. Out on the streets there was the myth of the madman—a man who hit women if they ever walked with uncovered heads. But the women loved walking on the streets and the day the madman threatened me, three of them argued with him and scared him off.

Soon afterwards my father was diagnosed with a rare combination of memory loss and agoraphobia. In his fear of the world beyond home lay the painful ironies of my own understanding of his sense of security that came out of living in a Muslim neighborhood that was casually referred to as miniature Pakistan. My father is not a religious Muslim. Nor am I. But I inherited a texture of life that was fractured between secular-liberal and essentialist-Islamic views. What does one do with multiple, fractured histories?

_The Ghetto Girl_ is not a film about Alzheimer’s, agoraphobia, or the whys and hows of hijab. The film is told as a third person narrative of a fictional girl who obsessively walks the streets. It is a voice that emerges as the girl approaches the idea of walking as strategy, an everyday practice that allows her to blur boundaries between the binaries of insider/outsider, documentary/fiction, oppressor/victim, amateur/professional, liberal/fundamentalist, much in the way the reenacted home movie that she creates complicates boundaries between truth/fiction and history/memory. The contradictory narratives of the salon invite her to invent spatial practices
that celebrate contradictions rather than treat them as aberrations. Her camera plays the role of a witness. She films with it through documentary coincidences and fictional reenactments, one informing the other. In the final moment when one is faced with a loss of memory, is it an absolute loss of history? Or does the reenacted image caught on camera resist erasure and come to stand in the face of loss?

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