GARDENS WITHOUT SHADOWS
CAPTURING THE SOUL IN PHOTOSHOP

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In Goregaon West, on the lane directly leading to the station, stands Pratibha Photo Studio, whose proprietors have taken photos of my family since the last forty years. As I climb up the stairs and walk into the inner room of the studio, I feel the familiar sensation of cool darkness, and the safety and comfort – like being ensconced in an armchair with infinite security – that a studio always gives me. In the old, now unused dark room I see the cut-outs set against the wall: thin sheets of ply cut in the shape of the crescent moon and a pink lotus that still stand as if they have just been put away after being used in a typical Maharashtrian 'wadi' photo.

Rummaging through old family albums, I find a black-and-white photo of my mother. Ornately fictionalized, the photograph, taken in a studio, shows my mother in her sixth month of pregnancy, decked up and sitting among the clouds on a crescent moon. She wears a crown on her head and has ornaments on her arms, which make her seem like a goddess who has stepped on to a Sangeet Natak stage fused with a Raj Kapoor film-set of a cloudy night sky.

> Jawdekar: The seventh month feast without flower ornaments is like a boat without an oar. Flower ornaments are a must for a pregnant woman. I'd said so on a Thursday. Now come. Wear this crown. – Begum Barve[1]

In the story of Dadasaheb Phalke and the king, Phalke ultimately convinces the king who refuses to allow his picture to be taken by a camera because it might capture and take away his soul, by making a fake negative – showing that the photo exorcised him from a ghost haunting him. In this culture where making images is considered suspect, mechanical likenesses such as those created by that invasive eye of modernity, the camera, achieve an even more dark, magical quality. Yet in this part of India a custom developed wherein pregnant women, otherwise heavily guarded and socially sacred, are taken to the photo studio to be clicked, decked with flowers and sitting on a swing, a lotus or a crescent moon. The black magic of the camera becomes a necessary dhatu, or ingredient, in this ritual of transforming the pregnant woman into a goddess or mythological character.

The alchemical ritual has changed since my mother got her photograph taken – as if the 'souls' of all objects captured by the chemical photographs have been released, and likenesses are created, virtually brought together, 'just by wishing, by desiring, at the click of a button'.[2]

Walking down the lanes of Central Camera in CST, I find what are now called the 'Wadi' CDs, referring to the sixth-month ritual, containing templates of sari-clad bodies of pregnant women without heads – decked with flowers around the waist, arms. Other props like crescent moon, crown, bow with arrows of flowers, basket of fruits and many other suitable items are also available in the template. All that the photographer-cum-Photoshop operator has to do, is paste the face of the pregnant woman in the template.

> Shyamrao: You are pregnant? You? You-hoo-hoo-hoo! Did you hear that? Nalawdebai is pregnant. Yoo-hoo-hoo-hoo! Look at his dhoti. Nalawdebai's 'dhoti'. Look at this dhoti-wearing woman. Look at this woman, pregnant without a womb.[3]

Begum Barve cursed Mumbai. She cursed the city, cursed its all-engulfing modernity, the industrial realism, because the city is the real villain of the play. It is also like her womb, an illusion full of fake, crumbling promises of grandeur.

It was the curse that came from the agony of this impotent womb that ten

1 Satish Alekar, Begum Barve, translated from Marathi by Shanta Gokhale, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1994. Begum Barve, the central character after whom the play is named, is a transvestite who has spent his life playing women's roles in the professional Marathi Sangeet Natak theatre of the early twentieth century. He dreams of living as a woman and even bearing a child. Jawdekar is the man of Barve's desire/imagination/disillusion, made up of fragments of various iconic male characters of Marathi theatre, who, at the end, turns out to be but a slave to the modern–urban routine of prosaic realism.

2 Nancy Adajania, 'In Aladdin's Cave: Digital Manipulation and the Transmutation of the Private Image in Urban India', in Angelika Fitz, Alexandra Schneider, Merle Kroger and Dorothee Wenner, eds, Import Export Cultural Transfer, Berlin: Parthas Verlag Gmbh, 2005.

3 The character of Shyamrao in Begum Barve represents the sordid reality of hetero-normative society. He represents a chain of characters – the narrator (sutradhar) who represents the society; an ageing, out-of-work, decadent male actor; a pimp who works for the office boss; and the owner of Begum Barve, the sublime yet fragile and sodomized female impersonator.

pregnant women[4] went for a *wadi* picture and had their heads cut off in Photoshop. Ten pregnant women were beheaded virtually to enable further manufacture of the bodies of goddesses. In the *wadi* template, the headless *sari*-clad bodies pose, bedecked with flowers, sometimes with bows and arrows, sometimes on moons or *shravanmas* swings. In digital photo studios, Photoshop operators go on pasting faces of pregnant clients on suitable, standardized bodies, producing many virtual goddesses out of this digital alchemy.

From a regional ritual, the Wadi photo has acquired a curious consumer character in Mumbai. Instead of the middle and upper-class Marathi people, it is more the migrants and people of lower economic strata in the city who participate in this ritual. The social need for transformation of the pregnant woman is replaced by the need to create private events and the desire to be the consumer of a piece of the local, which in turn is an aspired, metropolitan imagination. A social behaviour, which initially contradicted social belief, turns into a technological template and loses its charm for the original consumers. The templated icon-body however provides a tool of claiming citizenship/belonging for the migrants.

Meanwhile in the photograph taken a long innocent time ago, my mother sits on the moon. Two things catch my eye: her quietly steadfast look into the camera, and the hesitant way her hands lie opened out, palms facing downwards, on her lap. Poignantly, they hide and reveal at the same time, an uncertain strength, an unsteady force within her, belied by her steady look. The yellowing photo album with its textured surface seems to carry the material of that quicksand moment with it. I want to steady my mother in her ambiguous docility and hold those hands. Suddenly the photo looks so immediate, this present moment of her uncertainty colliding with the composed and framed fiction of the moon and clouds.

> Again, if some drowsy memory were to form in my mind, it would be of things learnt, not experienced: fantasy landscapes perhaps, seen in the backdrop of old paintings, or perhaps the words of old poets improperly understood. – Calvino[5]

Photoshop backgrounds of studio photos remind me of Calvino's story. Or perhaps our fantasy landscapes remembered drowsily are always gardens and picturesque places. These bright, digital labyrinths of uneven forms and half-known shapes lure one to glimpse and dimly recognize something of one's own lost faraway gardens in them.

Moving through the photo studios of Mumbai, I enter and exit the world of digital artifices – of gardens and picturesque places. I find many digitally composited memoirs of people – Photoshopped parts of personal archives. The Photoshop backgrounds – for baby pictures, marriage photos, relatives meeting at a festival – are quite simply constructions, made up of cut-and-pasted pieces of different picturesque scenes. They are synthetic artifices representing a newly globalized and consumerized domesticity.

'We are all exiles from our past.'[6] The process of ageing is not true; surely, it doesn't exist. Because we are banished from the past, we think a past exists, and in the search for this past we imagine we have aged, lived in time. In the belief or hope that the past exists, we think we have aged. Hence creating memories, records of past times, must always be in parts, an activity of construction.

There is a particular category of digital studio photos which are of interest to this essay. These are taken for reasons other than merely to keep records of

4 A template CD for *wadi* photos, available at places like Central Camera Lane in VT, has ten templates: images of ten women's bodies without faces are available in one CD.

5 Italo Calvino, 'Dry River', in *Numbers in the Dark*, Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995: 13.

6 Salman Rushdie, *In Imaginary Homelands*, USA: Viking Penguin, 1991: 12. Rushdie elaborates on the idea of past as 'a country from which we all have emigrated'. I have chosen to paraphrase this idea as Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, speaks in the context of diaspora and reclaiming the historical past as an act of construction.

ceremonies. Usually, marriage photo albums, baby pictures or relatives meeting at a festival use backgrounds designed to specific themes, which are sold in stock CD templates. However studio photos, on film or in digital format, are also commonly taken as recreation – an informal trip to the studio alone or with a friend or spouse, the special texture of a strip of photographic paper a colourful testimony to some unknown place visited. Outside the structures of the social ritual, and outside the structures of stock background templates used for these, the picturesque landscapes, gardens and other backgrounds in digital studio photos become the stuff of individual desire, a construction of the self in terms of a new aspirational identity. While marriage and institutional photos too carry this aspirational desire in their backgrounds, the photos of individuals (or couples) are designed by Photoshop operators specifically according to the individual client's demands. In their intricate and idiosyncratic negotiations with the iconic and the economic, these studio photos reveal the construction of an image of the aspiring private self in a new global upward mobility order. In the digital photo studios of Mumbai, local practices and beliefs, market trends and temporary iconographies kicked off by films and the mass media, zig-zag with technology and with globally changing ideas of lifestyle and mobility.

Looking at many of these photos, I realize that the backgrounds claim to show complete picturesque spaces, mostly gardens, as if their existence is real and whole, and yet they are totally imaginary spaces created by pasting stock elements like mountains, rivers and seasides in the background, and fountains, lawns, statues, swings, bikes, etc., in the foreground. The 'whole-ness' of a space inside the digital frame in this case comes together as a product after the clicking of the photograph, as opposed to the film photo, which composes a 'whole' space, while capturing it.[7]

In this category of individual photos groping for expression of social identities, we see young men in the city making regular trips to the digital photo studio, maybe 'just for recreation', but mostly hoping to find themselves one day somewhere in the landscape of the photo – just by placing/pasting themselves there. Sometimes there are photos of couples, but obviously projecting the agency and the desire of the man or husband. Unlike the marriage photos, such images have elaborate backgrounds of outdoors, with the subject posing in the space maybe with a bike or car, looking exaggeratedly at ease, as if aspiring to proclaim ownership of the space within the photograph. For, as told to me by those who made them and those who read them, these images are often in demand by migrants, and mostly men from the rising lower middle class in the city, as regular Sunday or holiday recreation.

The city is like a forest, hence its distribution like that of a park. – Francesco Milizia[8]

Sharp and bright-looking natural sceneries, gardens or cityscapes are constructed by pasting parts of these spaces – like bridges, trees, swings, rocks, etc. – rather than composing them, at the time of taking the photograph. One background contains fifteen to twenty layers of visual elements, having something more or less than the image size required to form a single perspective. There a foreground lawn shows up larger than what we are used to, here a tree or a stream looks slightly bigger than it would have been if captured by a traditional lens. And most noticeable, the lack of any darkness and rarely any shadow, even to soften the harsh bright contours of the elements in the image. Rather, in this shadowless realm, the surface lies unstable, in an eternal sharply focused present.

7 Lev Manovich, 'The Paradoxes of Digital Photography', in Photography after Photography, exhibition catalogue, Germany, 1995. Here, Manovich discusses the difference between the logical status of the film photograph and the digital one. He debunks the argument that film photography is a 'normal' and direct, therefore a more real representation of the world, and that the digital, being more mutable, is less of a real representation. He calls them 'two traditions of a visual culture'.

8 Manfredo Tafuri, Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development, USA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976: 20. In this book, Tafuri discusses the growth of urban planning and quotes various nineteenth-century architects and urban planners. Francesco Milizia was a nineteenth-century art and architecture historian.

Rajesh of Mega Digital Studio in Goregaon draws careful virtual lines and cuts out the client's figure, usually photographed in the studio, and places it in this colourful and bright background world – altering the size to match the proportions of the rest of the image. Being another layer, the subject's feet never really seem to touch the ground. In the unstable and omnipresent world of the digital studio photo, the subject does not pose but is 'placed' as a cut-out, suspended in the frame, strangely, always a foreigner to it. Ironically, because of this technological layering, the desire to be part of the background landscape is always a just-out-of-reach reality, deceptively near because the spaces seem to be part of our visual experience, yet far due to their new digital configuration and look.

The memory is still safe only because it is built out of forgetting of the unsafe. Looking at the cut–paste picturesque places in the backgrounds of digital studio images, I am assailed by an anonymous sense of nostalgia – for the security of an artifice. Dimly, we can glimpse our own artifices, fabricated so carefully, inside us.

... but perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. – Foucault[9]

There are many gardens in a middle-class suburban Bombay childhood. They were always places of small recreations, evening escapes from or exits to the city in a typically suburban experience. Slowly they entered the home, itself (construed as) a haven, a refuge from the (fo)rest of the city – the posters and landscape photographs hanging on the walls as pieces of decoration were our refuge within a refuge.

It's not really strange that the garden figures as a heterotopia in Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces', where he discusses the notion of space in the twenty-first century as a site. He describes heterotopias as 'spaces created by society to set off against ideal/illusory/too real concepts of how the "actually" existing society should be'.[10] Perhaps our search for gardens or the picturesque, in our refuges of control, goes far deeper than it looks.

In a particular sleepy and most mysterious garden tucked away in a still forgotten corner of Goregaon East, quiet afternoons came in and settled – from some other place, not Bombay of the 1980s – and went, god knows where. Neatly maintained by an invisible gardener or a strange municipal authority, the gate to this garden is so narrow that it's almost a secret. Whether out of ignorance or innocence, as a child I was never stopped from going to this secluded garden during afternoons of sleepy tramps, sinister lonely men and whispered nothings of an odd couple. Unsure, I know I have been in this garden even after then, through scattered images in different places at different times.

Nurul Hoda of Liberty Studios (Dongri) tells me that the purpose of these images is to look bright and sparkling because that's what is in demand. Everyone wants to look better than they are, he says. This duality between wanting to pose the real self, as if in a 'real'-looking space and time in the photo, yet changing it, demanding something that is not quite 'real', something that is wished for, is bridged interestingly by the digital technology. It creates an aesthetic of cut–paste layering and graphic compositions which, because of their common use in the popular media, have become the convention of how the 'real' is constructed and represented. Hence, while intervening into the frame-space with the required changes or conversions, the digital studio photograph as an 'index'[11] of a particular reality is not doubted. The time and space of the image

9 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', html http://Foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/Foucault.heteroTopia.en.html. Note from the site: 'This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres", and published by the French journal Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death. Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec.'

10 Ibid.

11 I use the word 'index' here in the semiotic sense, as used for a film photograph. The definition of an index is given as, 'a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but directly connected in some way to the signified'. See Daniel Chandler, Semiotics for Beginners, New York: Routledge, 2002. In this sense, a digital photograph is also an index of the thing represented.

may not have existed homogenously or simultaneously, yet this particular 'real' is the 'real' of another order, flexible to the individual's desire and virtual agency.

These digital studio images lack the fictionalized atmosphere of the film studio photograph even though they are part of the lineage of the carnivalesque mode of the earlier travelling studios (with cut-outs of actors, and props like cars, bikes and planes). However, the digital photos assume a much more serious function. Imagining oneself in such spaces becomes social identity construction because of the 'photo-real' look[12] possessed by the entire frame. I call it a look because the digital image, as such, is not produced photographically. Yet, as discussed above, there is a claim in the image, due to this photo-real look, that the event in the frame represents a certain 'real-ness'.[13] This 'photo-real' quality is consolidated as much by the tradition of photographic representation (as evidence of truth) as by newer digital-visual compositional conventions. In effect, the photo-real look of the digital studio image lends itself to many kinds of fantasy construction.

The picturesque in the digital studio photograph comes out of and thus forms part of an aesthetic shared by other popular visual media. It comes out of long-standing traditions of wall poster photographs (of pristine-looking, 'framed' natural places, as opposed to our 'manmade' surroundings) and picture postcards, and recently, flex advertisement hoardings. While in the earlier studio photos, the chronotope of the photograph was unilayered and homogenous, now a multilayered image corresponding to the proverbial aesthetic of excess exhausts the entire frame-space.

It may be the material of flex, with its lower latitude for light contrast, which has made exaggerated brightness such a commonly accepted quality of popular visual culture. So do the electronic sensors in the digital camera bring in that sharply focused quality to everything around us. Yet, as I sit watching Hoda create an image in his computer, I see that his first impulse of making the whole image two or three times brighter than it is, is a practice I have seen very commonly in all the studios I have visited. Suddenly the image becomes almost like a façade to hide something only fleetingly glimpsed behind it, and this compulsive demand for brightness becomes a defensive reflex action against all those uneasy dark shapes around us that we want to look away from.

'Imagine yourself in a garden, the key to which is possessed only by you...' – hypnosis sessions commonly begin with this line. As we travel inside, we construct, bit by bit, a picturesque place or a garden we have never seen. In studio photos, what we remember about ourselves, our personal archives, become like museum tableaus showing frozen images of the past, constructed and many times fabricated by us.

Wandering in these labyrinthine virtual spaces, I find that the digital backgrounds are in effect privately fabricated and controlled versions of public spaces, in which subjects proclaim control through the codes of 'posing and proximity' of the earlier photo studios. Hence, while the space around the subject is a constructed digital utopia – mass-produced yet marketed as a private fantasy, and the objects or props like motorbikes and cars are public consumer goods, available in special CDs containing a number of images of foreign bikes and cars.

Frontal posing/placement in digital studio photos turns into an almost defiant claim for belonging and ownership of the space inside the photo, through the very act of placing the subject in that particular background. To illustrate this point, in

12 I use the term 'photo-real' here not in the sense of the style of painting called Photorealism, but in the sense of the digital image and each element in it having the look of a photographic representation. Although this distinction itself privileges the photograph as a more 'real' representation, I use 'photo-real' to point to the processes in the creation of a conventional digital aesthetic in popular visual culture.

13 I write '...certain "real-ness"...' in the sense of a visual tradition existing since the time of film photography, of regarding the photograph as an index or the real evidence of the event signified in it.

some digital studio photos, this frontality is deviated from – it is enough for the client to be placed in the background, in proximity to the space, looking into it, maybe at the mountains in the distance or a car standing outside a foreign-looking cottage. However, this claim of belonging and ownership is also wielded in another curious manner – by keeping the subject larger in the frame than would be required for the single-point perspective. This not only makes many studio photos unrealistic, but also the disregard to the exactness of size of the subject is more a proclamation of agency than an omission. An extreme example of this is the digital studio photo which is made like a film poster, with the subject posing frontally and iconic.

On asking, I find that unlike the marriage album templates, studio operators work on these backgrounds as commissioned by the clients. Each studio has its own stock of backgrounds made by the operator from images of picturesque places available on the internet, and the client can choose the background he wants while demanding certain changes. However, highly mediated by the technology and available market conceptions of mobility, this agency is illusory. In effect, you can dream only this, and even then, you can only dream.[14] Thus through these unstable landscapes, an illusory social agency is wielded and public spaces manufactured – the people suspended in events, many of which have only happened inside the image.

In an age of mobile cameras, digital studios fall in the category of small interfaces like TV reality shows, locality billboard announcements carrying photos of local leaders or private persons announcing a personal event to the public, newspapers carrying photographs and news reports by readers, etc., which allow consumers an illusory entry into a public zone – through visibility and an agency to negotiate this visibility. This public zone is defined in terms of viewership and the creation of an aesthetic convention, which is shared by popular visual media.

Digitally composed studio photos, in that sense, offer a highly mediated space for performance of the self to the client, within the gamut of popular visual media and its aesthetics. 'Har Hindustani mein ek hero hai' ('Within every Indian, there is a hero') – says the tagline of a bike company advert. The citizen/consumer–hero thus gets his/her own space for performance within recently formed small interfaces of popular visual media. In this context, the actual digital print of the image produced by the studio becomes the 'real' material product of this individual desire to enter the public domain.

A couple in an unknown French garden, complete with fountain and Greek statue, young men on bikes or standing by cars in a park or in front of a cottage with distant mountains impossibly placed/lensed in a panoramic view – all such images occupy that fragile, distant, yet reassuring zone between memory and imagination in the personal archive. In an age of graphics and animation, these images have photo-real verisimilitude as the effect rather than the starting point. For example, a digitally cut-out Shahrukh Khan beside the posing subject in the photo studio's Photoshopped image cannot be a computer graphic or animation figure. 'Real' photographic images of actors, and of props like cars, bikes and houses, are a necessity in this fiction creation, showing the key desire for 'real' materiality of this piece of fantasy. As digital photo studios go on manufacturing these privately dreamed public places, the unstable cut–paste realms become the perfect new 'real-looking' worlds – stages, for our roopantar, an illusory and a temporary converting into our better(-looking) selves.

14 Nancy Adajania discusses the idea of roti, kapda, makan and khwab being the slogan sold by the contemporary Indian consumer society in her article, 'In Aladdin's Cave'.

…I want to share this wilderness of failure. – Derek Jarman, in his film The Garden (1990)

Like Manu's garden or the garden of Eden, the sacred centre of the world is always occupied by a garden or a city, both relics of human beings' control over wild nature. Pursued by the fragmented picturesque places in the backgrounds with forms I seem to know but can hardly recognize, and drowsily remembered shapes, I finally see them for what they must be – a self-preservation, a fragile construction.

A city made up of many gardens, as Marco Polo would have called it, where everyone came to visit but no one could stay. Of course the city had its obverse where they stayed and worked, like in the city of Moriana in Invisible Cities. The obverse was everything the gardens were not. So everyone periodically made a garden out of their own imagination, and slowly began to replace their memories. Cutting out whatever was not wanted, sticking only that which looked good, so that slowly the gardens began to look unstable, disproportionate and mixed-up. To make it a real obverse, if such a thing exists, sometimes they forgot to paste shadows into these gardens. In order to avoid looking at the city they were staying in, whenever they were there, everyone formulated it in terms of some part of the city's obverse, so that if you asked them, they would always remember themselves in these gardens – without shadows.