

# Muhammad Asghar

## Familial nostalgia

### Abstract

Based on an ethnographic field research conducted in the domestic and public spheres of the province of Punjab (Pakistan), this paper discusses real images (the family photos) embedded in their narrative context. It contributes towards understanding the role play by photographs both in domestic and public spheres by focusing on their function and the effect they have on the everyday lives of people and it also explores the changing dynamics of this role in a micro-social process. My contention is that displaying photographs at home or in the workplace and looking at them brings not only emotional satisfaction and nostalgia but it also functions to help one to overcome the sorrow of the passing of time entails. Our research suggests that photographs are bond up with the private lives of people and serve as a form of “home entertainment”.

### Keywords

Domestic and Public Spheres.  
Ethnographic survey. Family photos.  
Nostalgia.

### Introduction

Since a few decades, studies on the subject of photography, nostalgia and cultural memorabilia have gained significant interest in arts, humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Other contemporary literature concentrates on the spatial and social limits of such photographs which show the cultural impact of private images.<sup>2</sup> Many writers, artists, anthropologists and sociologists writing on this subject of family photographs have gone beyond mere theory and analysis to expose personal stories of familial relations –the passion and rivalries, the tensions and anxieties and problems that have for the most part, remained on the edge or outside the family album.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays the social functions photography is integrally tied to the

1 see: LISTER, M.: *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*. New York : Routledge, 1995. BARTHES, R.: *Camera Lucida*. New York : Hill and Wang, 1980. SONTAG, S.: *On Photography*. New York : Penguin, 1975. PINNEY, C.: *Camera Indica: The Social Life of India. Photographs*. London : Reaktion Books Ltd, 1997. CLARKE, G.: *The Portrait in Photography*. London : Raktions Books Ltd, 1992.

2 for example: Harisch 1999, 2012.

3 HIRSCH, M.: *The Familial Gaze*. Hannover : Dartmouth, 2012. p. 7.

emotional structure of the modern family. Family photos not only display the unity of the family and are itself an instrument of its togetherness; it chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of these rituals.<sup>4</sup> This paper has similar objectives and it discusses real images, themselves embedded in narrative contexts, and functional images in Punjabi (Pakistan) domestic and public spheres. One type of familial memorabilia is family photos. As a subject for scholarly study it is one of the neglected aspects in the disciplines of anthropology and art history in Pakistani national discourse.<sup>5</sup> Therefore this study deals with some of the interesting facts about photography of familial nostalgia in domestic and public spheres of Punjabi society.

According to many scholars photographs play a pivotal role in creation of familial memorabilia which transform one’s house into a “home”.<sup>6</sup> Our research suggests that photographs are bond up with the private lives of people and serve as a form of “home entertainment”. In our age of digital culture, they operate through a range of mediums that mediates between the domestic and public sphere; public images, as

4 HIRSCH, M.: *The Familial Gaze*. Hannover : Dartmouth, 1999. p. 5

5 ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016.

6 see: CSIKSZENTMIHALYI M., ROCHBERG-HALTON.: E.: *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1981. HUNT. P.: Gender and the Construction of Home Life. In: ALLAN G and CROW G. (eds.): *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere*. London : Macmillan, 1989, p. 66-81. ROSE, G.: Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ISSN 1475-5661, 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 5-18.

they enter the domestic space, domesticate the public, and give public significance to the private<sup>7</sup>

Based on an ethnographic field research conducted by me, this paper contributes towards understanding the role play by photographs both in domestic and public spheres by focusing on their function and the effect they have on the everyday lives of people and it also explores the changing dynamics of this role in a micro-social process. The objective is to uncover the family’s subjective feelings behind these family photographs particularly in domestic spaces; to find the connections between them and the memories they trace and the stories about the past that linger therein.

### Family Photographs, Domestic and Public Spheres

Family photographs, taken by some trained or an untrained person at a family or any other function, often have an unsettling reception. When the photographs are opened in domestic and public settings in the form of album or displayed on the wall, family members or friends remark on the general quality and likeness of the photograph, accompanying their observations, rejoices, and grief with comments like:; “Oh, You’ve changed, haven’t you?” “Look at her”. She still looks young!” “Would that I had been there in the group!” “Alas, if only she hadn’t died!” “Oh, I looked so adorable!”and so on. A certain truth emerges from such statements. We all make a number of tacit assumptions about the characteristics and our impressions of the people in our

7 ROSE, G.: Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ISSN 1475-5661, 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 6.

inner circle, often giving them some nicknames; the truth is that these remarks show that we are living in the microcosm of intimacy that the photos evoke.

The poignancy of such moments and the frequency people take snapshots on any or all occasions is evidence of how important they are to people.<sup>8</sup> My purpose here is merely to identify and examine some parallel and generally common traits that this proclivity evinces and what they signify in regard to familial nostalgia in domestic and public spaces, rather than trying to construct any unified theory.

At the end of the twentieth century, since photography became commoner than before in our societies, particularly through the aid of mobile phones cameras, people seem to have a more widespread emotional dependence on family photographs that are usually found in dwellings as well as workplaces. These photos present a category of material things that serve as an aid to ruminating about the relationship between the self and the social encounter the displayed photos embody.<sup>9</sup> Family photographs were a common medium of familial self-presentation in many societies. They can present an image of harmony in a family that actually might not really exist.<sup>10</sup> My contention is that displaying photographs at home

or in the workplace and looking at them brings not only emotional satisfaction but it also functions to help one to overcome the sorrow of the passing of time entails.

Apart from adorning the home, family photos are evidence past happenings. They commemorate significant events in people's life and thereby keep alive the collective memories of individuals and families and therefore they have considerable cultural significance.<sup>11</sup> Moreover they serve another important social function that is that they contain information about the changing dynamics of a family. The function of displaying family photographs, particularly in domestic spaces, is usually done by the female members of the house in the elite class and middle class homes whereas in poor class homes it is mainly done by the males. In both cases they represent a characteristic mode of display which is highly significant.<sup>12</sup>

Many elite class domestic spaces are filled with a cluster of family photos of four generations while many other people of the elite and other classes preserve pleasant memories of their weddings, trips and other important events in their life through these replicas. When people have to spend long periods of absence from their families photographs of their loved ones fulfil their emotional needs and become

the objects of love.<sup>13</sup> One is reminded of Pierre Bourdieu's account in his illuminating study of 1960s rural French photographic discourse that all such moments communicate "the essence of social memory"<sup>14</sup>. Roland Barthes suggested that the family photographs can also make a person miss his family and bring the tears in eyes. Sometimes the pleasure or poignancy evoked by such photographs can be more than what people can describe.<sup>15</sup> Typical family portraits are clusters of pictures of family members, wedding and graduation ceremonies. They are quite prolific in households of many elite and middle class homes and are often placed in more secluded sections of the house, also they may be displayed in such a way to show how precious the people in the photograph are to the residents of the house.<sup>16</sup> Photos of deceased members of family will almost invariably occupy a significant place among other displayed photos. However in many public spaces such as in offices and shops, such pictures are garlanded with fresh flowers every day.

<sup>13</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016. p. 134-135.

<sup>14</sup> BOURDIEU, P.: *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1990. p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> BOURDIEU, P.: *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1990. p. 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016. p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016. p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> HIRSCH, M.: *The Familial Gaze*. Hannover : Dartmouth, 1999. p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016. p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> HALLE, D.: *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago : University of Chicago press, 1993. p. 95.

During my field research, I found that, the subject matter of the photographs displayed in the public spaces such as in office and shops were quite similar. Universally it is claimed that family albums are all more or less alike and are merely a plethora of redundancy.<sup>17</sup> Basically I agree with this description by Rose. However, there are nuances of differences. During my doctoral research in Germany in 2015, I got a chance to visit several European countries where I saw many domestic and public spaces were filled with photographs of family events similar in the way they are displayed in Pakistani domestic spaces. In Bourdieu's sociological photography of France, wherein I found many customs and behavioural patterns that were very much the same as those in Pakistan, however, I noted that in regard to the practice of people putting religious photos next to those of family members as mentioned in Bourdieu's study<sup>18</sup> only photos of deceased people were placed with religious pictures, whereas in Pakistan, my research showed that overall and particularly rural culture the practice was to put photos of live family members alongside religious ones. The purpose for this is that the interlocutor believes this will bring benediction or baraka on them.

<sup>17</sup> ROSE, G.: Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ISSN 1475-5661, 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> BOURDIEU, P.: *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1990.

In many cultures around the world there is a tradition of preserving the memories of ancestors through their belongings as well as their photographs. However, nowadays photographs have become the primary medium to fulfill this function and they provide the deceased ancestors an identity in the domestic domain. They not only reflect the continuity of the family but also tell the story of the success and hardships of the persons who are portrayed.<sup>19</sup>

The practice in most families is that soon after they get some photographs developed they select some to put in special albums which are later kept in boxes and taken out on special occasions to revive memories. Special photographs get enlarged and framed or sometimes left unframed and pasted direct on the walls in prominent places.<sup>20</sup> This increases the beauty of the dwelling. In elite class domestic and public spaces the photographs have different dynamics. In many houses and offices that I visited, photographs were pinned onto a notice board. Thus they present a galaxy of images showing various themes. Annette Kuhn states,

<sup>19</sup> ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016. p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> ROSE, G.: Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ISSN 1475-5661, 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 7.

"--- in the process of using – producing, selecting, ordering and displaying – photographs, the family is actually in the process of making itself".<sup>21</sup>

In looking at the meaning family photos convey, one is led to conclude that basically the image is not just a replica of what the viewer sees but also of his feelings for the person; like someone looking at the picture of his beloved or his children. Of course it cannot compare with the actual living presence of his dear ones but in its way, rather it tells him and lets him relish what his own treasured feelings are for that person. Of course, 'beloveds' have both a good and bad side and lovely children can be worse, so the photograph acts as a temporary sieve that subjectively identifies the real feelings that persist in the hearts of people.

Similarly this is the case for photographs of parents, elders and it has more poignant relevance for dear ones who have passed away. Apart from the emotional aspect, particularly for elders and seniors, photographs also signify the values the viewer associates with that person and identify his status and stature in the family hierarchy as perceived by the viewer.

Family photographs are the main method of preserving memories of close relatives. For this reason they are often described as being "irreplaceable" and when the photograph is of a deceased person it gains

<sup>21</sup> KUHN, A.: *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London : Verso, 2002. p. 19.

significance in every way. It not only evokes memories of that person, it embodies the emotions and regard the viewer felt for that lost dear one. Many of the offices and shops of middle class owners are adorned with garlanded photo frames of deceased persons who were special to the interlocutors. They were mostly their fathers and their brothers or sons, who might unfortunately have untimely passed away. One interlocutor I interviewed told me about the picture of his father which was displayed prominently in his shop. He stated that the picture of his father was very special to him and that he was a wonderful man and a role model for whole of the family and his friends. A garland of fresh flowers was hung on the photograph every day. In this way the interlocutor remembered and paid tribute to his father each day and made him feel as if he was with him in the shop.

These parental and ancestral photographs stand in time sometimes generation after generations, presenting a fixed image of the forefather; the same expression, the same clothes, the same body language, which do not become banal but gain a status of representing the person portrayed. They signify an “archetype of visual memory” and this encapsulates a whole lifetime. One image may typify a host of associations and memories, even what the descendent might feel he has gained in life, what he has learned and his formative years. This is the hidden quality in such photographs have the power to evoke memories in the mind of the progeny viewer.<sup>22</sup>

In many elite and middle class homes I found that formation in which many framed photographs were arranged on the walls or on tables was important to the residents. On the walls may be arranged symmetrically or gallery style. One frame may contain several photos. Nowadays in upper class houses there is a trend to have a large number of different sizes and types and compose them all together in a sort of asymmetric order. On tables or shelves the principle is mainly that they all should be visible. One factor that often is present in arranging photographs is that the images of one or two persons should be given more prominent sort of places of honour in a group. In poorer house the main principle is that the higher a photo is placed that denotes greater honour to it. Otherwise in many houses just an ad hoc arrangement is common.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that these arrangements may be changed from time to time with altering status or affections among the members of a family and of course with the introduction of new members due to marriages. Often photographs that are discarded by one generation may be dug up by subsequent ones and reinstated.

The “variations on a theme” that occur to photos that decorate houses is one matter. Naturally the

Photographs Album: So Great a Cloud of Witnesses. In: GRAHAM C., (eds.) *The Portrait in Photograph*. London : Raktions Books, 1992. p. 197.

23 STOKES, P.: The Family Photographs Album: So Great a Cloud of Witnesses. In: GRAHAM C., (eds.) *The Portrait in Photograph*. London : Raktions Books, 1992. p. 203.

photographs in albums far outnumber those displayed in the house. But time and emotion bring changes even here. Some persons may tear up or discard pictures out of hate or fear; other snapshots may get defaced with age. Some people may throw away photographs without a care and think they are not important; others can't bear to lose even one because photos portray people. Some ponder a great deal about keeping or discarding one. This process of selection may be likened to a photograph itself of someone aiming a camera to decide what should be shown and photographed as a record for the future or not.<sup>24</sup>

During my research I seldom came across photographs of people visiting famous monuments, tourist spots, etc., displayed in a domestic domain. Perhaps the main reason for this is that nowadays modern technology has developed cell phones, etc., with high resolution cameras that people carry with them all the time and thus have the opportunity to take instant photos or make videos. They take ‘selfies’ of themselves, friends and families as well as photograph school and academic events, community events and wedding photographs, which they save in their smart phones as well as in laptops, iPads and desktop computers, like previously people kept family albums. Also, these photos are saved on facebook, instagram and flicker and can be seen and shared with the family and friends

24 STOKES, P.: The Family Photographs Album: So Great a Cloud of Witnesses. In: GRAHAM C., (eds.) *The Portrait in Photograph*. London : Raktions Books, 1992. p. 204.

who might be far away instantly. The question is that are printed personal and family photographs on the decline? In my survey for doctoral studies, I hardly found any new family photographs in photo frames. I posed this question to a couple of digital photo studios in metropolitan cities of Lahore, Multan and in Muzaffargarh. All replied that because of smart phone cameras and laptops their business has gradually decreased.<sup>25</sup>

The family photographs studied above has dealt mainly with modern displays of the upper classes that are influenced by western aesthetics. But on the other hand, some middle class conservative families and people in villages are reluctant to display personal family photos where others can view them. It is relevant here to mention in this context that village families in Punjab are commonly photographed in local studios with studio backdrops. Many conservative middle class families do not like to display family photos and therefore they are confined to personal albums or trunks which are opened only sometimes on family gatherings or among themselves to remember loved ones and past memories when they feel it like. Bourdieu states in context of French domestic photography:

25 ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016.

--- in most peasant households, photographs are ‘locked away’ in a box, apart from wedding photographs and certain portraits. It is considered indecent or ostentatious to show pictures of members of the family to just anyone.<sup>26</sup>

Thus one notices that western domestic aesthetics of keeping family photos are quite similar to those of Pakistan.

The family photos are sometimes rearranged and regrouped together to represent new memories with the passage of time; and maybe a new photograph is added --- or subtracted, because to the family member who sets these photos the beauty and concept of the composition does not only lie in the way the photographs are displayed but also in his or her feelings for the ones depicted, which thus also plays a part in the arrangement.

In regard to the photographs are displayed on the walls and shelves of a house, David Halle comments in his fascinating study of visual imagery in various social class of New York;

The free-standing arrangement makes it simple to subtract, add and regroup photos...after a divorce pictures of former family member - a spouse or an in-law - can easily be removed, and the remaining pictures arranged to reflect the new composition of the family.<sup>27</sup>

26 KUHN, A.: *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London : Verso, 2002. p. 24.

27 HALLE, D.: *Inside Culture: Art*

The domestic space created by such kinds of photographs brings back the sentiments, fond or otherwise, of families that have separated from each other. Sometimes as Rose Gillian in her essay “Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings” suggested that they; “articulate absence, emptiness and loss, as well as togetherness.”<sup>28</sup>

The domestic and public domains of poor families are also often filled with photographs of their loved ones, which mainly have been taken at some celebration or function and almost invariably these are away from the house. But in shops there are only portraits of live, retired or deceased family members. These picture are often displayed with popular posters of Sufi saints.<sup>29</sup> In poor households an almost perennial feature is that photographs of small and adolescent, male and female children are taken along with the father or other male members of the family. The family photographs, instead of being displayed around on tables, mantelpieces or shelves, are frequently exhibited on one specific open shelf-like alcove in the walls of a room or hung or pasted on the walls. Usually in a poor class village family many or all the photographs are stuck in a single frame and the male head of the

*and Class in the American Home*. Chicago : University of Chicago press, 1993. p. 112.

28 ROSE, G.: Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study. In *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, ISSN 1475-5661, 2003, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 7.

29 ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : LitVerlag, 2016.

family decides how the individual photographs are to be arranged. Several photographs in one single frame give an impression of family unity and delineate an identity of the family more indicatively, apart from which it saves money by saving the cost of having several frames. By the way, as far as upper class families are concerned, the technical procedure of cutting and composite printings permits interesting and sometimes spectacular juxtapositions in family albums.

### Conclusion

This paper has investigated the nostalgia of family photos. Family photos are a class apart from others, in as much that they are imbued with the deepest human feelings of a microcosm that is the basic cell of any society, the family. They are common, widespread, have many universal similarities in different countries and are treasured by the people who keep them. They are decorative, aid in providing an identity to families, engender a spirit of unity apart from being chronicles at both individual and familial level of these microcosms. This study has also dwelt on how these photographs are arranged. Most importantly it has examined the significance, importance and emotional value of these photographs. The meanings conveyed by them are intricate and diverse. They are closely connected to the social and material life of the various people in their domestic and public spheres. In most cases, family photos serve as nostalgia, as record and reminders of a modern family life and serve as a form of entertainment. They have a power not only to evoke memories and narratives but are also a particular kind of authentic document that establishes a connection between the past and present.

After all, photographs are one of the best ways to keep the past alive. When an incident occurs in life like a marriage a function, an important visit, etc., the participants experience the occasion and thereafter the physical experience is confined to the memory. Of course the event may bring some permanent change in the lives of the family concerned like a marriage, award of a degree, a death, etc., but the experience of the event itself ends.

By photographing it we capture the significance of the moment and preserve it. Thus everyday people add meaning and importance to their lives by photographing what they do. A snapshot of a group of old friends enjoying a get together --- that moment is captured and preserved; of a baby gurgling and laughing happily; of a bride looking beautiful on her wedding --- all these moments are commemorated and preserved. Then no matter what changes time may bring, those friends will always be enjoying themselves, the baby happy and the bride, beautiful. If circumstances separate people from one another they can always have moments together with photographs and if fate deprives a family of someone his picture will keep his presence alive. Just keeping family photos in the house is a parallel method of being together. If a daughter, son or other member of a family is living separately it gives them pleasure and sense of belonging when they visit their family house and see their photo there. Thus family photographs are whetstones for the memory and the "royal chronicles" of ordinary individuals and families.

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### Author

Muhammad Asghar PhD, Assistant Professor,  
Institute of Art and Design  
Government College University  
New Civil Lines Campus  
Sargodha Road  
38000 Faisalabad  
Pakistan  
asghar@daad-alumni.de

### Profile

Author holds PhD in Design Studies (German: Designwissenschaft) from Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel Germany and an MSc in Print and Publishing from Stuttgart Media University in Stuttgart, Germany. He has recently published his book titled "The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab" with LIT Verlag, Zürich (Switzerland). Having a background of art, design and media studies, his research interests have come to converge on questions relating to art, design and visual culture as well as cultural anthropology. He works as an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art and Design, GC University 38000 Faisalabad, Pakistan.