

Desire and Discretion in Karachi's Informal Rental Spaces

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I studied at one of Karachi's well-known A-Levels schools, one that has a reputation for being progressive. Yet, if two people on campus were ever seen hugging for a second too long, some staff member doing the rounds would shake their finger and shout across the ground: 'No physical!' Interestingly, this happened irrespective of the students' gender presentation. For me, coming of age was shaped largely by instances like these, when I was made aware in implicit and explicit ways that I do, in fact, have a body and my body has to exist within the bounds of a prescribed propriety, bounds which I couldn't fully understand then.

That the public sphere of Karachi is stifling is not news to anyone. While I've seen people argue, hurl curses, and even break into physical fights on the streets of Karachi, I cannot remember the last time I saw two people holding hands or embracing one another in public. I do not just mean streets or parks or malls, but even private spaces where others are around, such as in shared rides, social gatherings with colleagues, or family dinners where elders would raise eyebrows even at married couples if they were to display any affection. I recall that in 2012, a well-known morning show host took to Karachi's public parks with a camera crew to film an exposé of couples using those parks as dating spots.¹ Then earlier this year, a young couple was verbally and physically harassed by a mob in a public park in Islamabad on the eve of Independence Day.² These are just two of the numerous instances set against an unforgiving landscape where tender encounters are regularly policed.

For young people coming of age in the last decade, the internet has been a way to connect digitally with peers without having to venture out of their homes; strangers meeting online on apps like Kik or Bumble could become friends and sometimes romantic interests. With high-speed connectivity, the gig economy also experienced a boom, opening up all kinds of remote, freelancing opportunities from data entry jobs to ghost-writing stints, non-contractual positions that can easily be taken up by school, college or university students. Simultaneously, car, rickshaw, or even bike rides can be booked easily through online ride-hailing apps such as Careem, InDrive, and Bykea. Thanks to a growing social circle, greater financial independence, and increased mobility around the city, hanging out with friends and dating became easier. This newfound ease opened up the previously unimaginable possibility of informally renting a room as a teenager or young adult.

In Karachi, informal rental spaces are colloquially known as 'Airbnbs' even if they are not rented from the official Airbnb website and are found through social connections. Over the past few weeks, as I talked to friends and acquaintances about their experiences with informal rentals, I realised that I was not alone in negotiating between the body and its freedoms. In a context where one's parents are not likely to support choices that diverge from their moral code, the risks of striking out on our own are profound for many of us.

I sit in the Prem Gali at our campus with a friend who moved out of her parents' home last year. She plays with the keys of the one bedroom that is her own, as two cups of chai steam the air between us. I ask her how long she has been renting Airbnbs.

'God, are you going to judge me? Like...five years, maybe.'

'So, what kind of areas in the city would you say are ideal for Airbnbs?'

'You have to understand, it's a delicate balance between privacy and danger. I don't want to be on, say, Sharah-e-Faisal, but I also don't want to be somewhere completely aloof from the city with a random guy. I mean, now I'm in a very stable long-term relationship, *Mashallah...*' she said with a smile. 'But when I would book these Airbnbs with people I met at parties—and even now [with my partner]—I don't want to feel completely isolated. I just think that's dangerous, you know?'

'When you say danger, what do you mean?'

'See, there are two kinds of danger. If you're too much in a really rushy [busy] place then you know, you can get caught by neighbourhood people....But if you're in, say, Phase 7 Extension where there is no neighbourhood to speak of, then what if the guy you're with turns out to be a creep?'

I am reminded of a time I felt similar trepidation when booking an Airbnb: the minutes of anxiety before finding the right building, the right gate, the right floor, the right door in an isolated area of the city completely new to me. On my phone, the host's text message read: '17-C I think...it isn't written outside, just a grey door, it's already open a little. Please lock it behind you.' My eyes flitted between my phone and the three slate-grey iron gates before me. 'Ok coming in,' I replied. As shopkeepers opened their stores and drivers wiped car windshields, I felt their eyes on me. I tested each of the three gates with my body weight until one gave way and I stepped inside into a cloud of dust, clicking the gate shut behind me.

After speaking with multiple people, I realised that a preferred 'Airbnb' is usually close to a residential area so that temporary tenants are not too conspicuous to curious neighbours and regular passersby. It is also usually close enough to a commercial area that one can step out to get snacks, medicines, or anything needed at short notice.

I am chatting with another friend in his bedroom while I drink an almost flat Cola Next. He's smoking his third cigarette with all the doors and windows closed, so technically, I'm smoking too. He tells me how an Airbnb should ideally not be too close to his own house because—and he doesn't even bother finishing his sentence because the reasons are apparently obvious enough. But, he adds, it also shouldn't be too far from his house either. 'Warna Careem pe hi saaray paise kharch hojaeyein,'[¶] he said. 'Already the Airbnb I use costs seven thousand for ten hours.'

'Is this Airbnb actually from the Airbnb website?'

'Oh, no, it's a friend's.'

'Have you ever considered booking from the Airbnb site?'

He explains how informally rented spaces are sometimes owned and rented out by wealthy owners living overseas, and other times by young people trying to earn some side cash from the booming gig economy in Karachi, but rarely from the official Airbnb site itself. Airbnb is a formal platform which makes it more expensive and the rates are fixed. The space is usually owned by a complete stranger, has to be booked for at least one whole night, and also leaves a digital footprint. Instead, young people negotiating desire within the bounds of their limited financial capacities turn to their social circles and social media groups that they consider 'safe' to find relatively cheap, often unsanitary, and rundown apartments or rooms in apartment complexes on an hourly basis. This way, they are not only able to find a desirable space but also a host of their choice.

'So you'd prefer the host to always be your friend?'

'I mean, I don't know about friend, but I'd prefer the host to be young, always. Because they kinda know what I'm doing there anyway so the host knows to stay out of the way while I'm there and you know, there is a level of mutual trust and agreement, right? Like I won't tell on you and you never bring us up.'

In most cases, people prefer to be greeted by a key under a doormat or a flower-pot, along with a post-it note on the side table with the wi-fi password and directions for using speakers and air conditioning. When the host is a friend though, a casual hello precedes the handing over of keys to the place.

When the terms of the stay have been decided, the time of day has to be agreed with one's partner. Often, the time depends on the circumstances of the individual seeking a rental space—

[¶] Otherwise all my money would be spent on Careem ³

perceived safety during the day as compared to at night, the availability of transport, and the need to take appropriate leave from family without raising suspicions. In my conversations, male-presenting individuals commonly considered night-time more convenient while the female-presenting ones preferred the daytime.

I am on a group call with two of my girlfriends who have been a couple for two years.

"When do you usually go to the Airbnb? And how long would you usually stay?"

'*Yaar, yeh tricky hota hai* because *din mein*[¶] is too public, but then at night, I can't use university- or work-related excuses to leave the house,' one of them said.

'Yeah, and usually I do use university as an excuse...like, I go to university first and then go to the Airbnb from there. Which is why it is also close to our university, you know?'

No matter the time of day, one brings a lot of vulnerability and trust to the Airbnb and places it in one's partner and the space in equal measure. Dust may pervade the space, floors and sheets might look used or grubby, the water might run out, the air-conditioning might give up midway, but for the few hours that the air in the room is rife with affection and desire, hot and hurried, urgent and relieved, the stranger's bed, the stranger's room, the stranger's apartment is home. One may have seen it for the first time and possibly for the last, but a home is beautiful, even if it is makeshift and temporary. Whether the fleeting hours spent in the space are an expression of long-term love or a short spark of desire, they leave a mark on its tenants.

I am with another friend in the park outside the university, sitting under a tree with generous shade, my fingers scribbling notes and his fingers knotting grass.

"What does renting an Airbnb with your girlfriend mean to you?"

'You know, Zehra, I love my girlfriend, I'll marry her, I know that. *Tou, sirf woh sab nahi hota, matlab*,[#] we make chai together, we watch a movie, *baatein kartay hain araam se*.[•]

'Of course. I'm sorry, I never meant to insinuate that.'

[¶] Dude, this is tricky because in the daytime.

[#] So, it's not just that going on, I mean.

[•] We relax and talk to each other.

'No, I know. But I'm just saying. That's what renting a room with her means to me. It means that...I'll tell you with dramatic effect. It means that:

*Waqt ki qaid mein, zindagi hai magar,
Chand ghariyan yahi hain jo azaad hain*[∞]

Informally renting a room in Karachi is about more than seeking refuge. It is about cherishing one's own agency, the bittersweet undulations of young love, and precious moments of reprieve in a city that suffocates affection. To demand the fulfilment of one's heart and flesh is an act of self-preservation but it is also an act of taking control, of saying: let anyone do what they want. I am here, I will desire, I will fall in love.

[∞] *Life is bound by the prison of time, but,*

These are the only few moments of freedom.

A verse from the poem *Aaj Jaane Ki Zidd Na Karo* (Don't Insist on Leaving Today) by Fayyaz Hashmi.

Notes

- 1. Zakaria, "Public Spaces, Private Lives," 2012.
- 2. "Couple Harassed by Charged Mob on Independence Day in Islamabad (Video)."

"Couple Harassed by Charged Mob on Independence Day in Islamabad." *Daily Pakistan*, August 17, 2024.
<https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/17-Aug-2024/couple-harassed-by-charged-mob-on-independence-day-in-islamabad-video>.

Zakaria, Rafia. "Public Spaces, Private Lives." *Dawn*, January 31, 2012.
<https://www.dawn.com/news/692321/public-spaces-private-lives>.